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J. Mansell

## **IDOL WORSHIP**

*By the Same Author*

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# IDOL WORSHIP

*By*  
E. W. SAVI

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# IDOL WORSHIP

## CHAPTER I

### THE PURSUIT

THE service at the Cenotaph was over and the crowds dispersing when Peter Dunbar, caught in the midst of a particularly dense throng of jostling humanity at the junction of Parliament Street and Bridge Street, was brought suddenly to a halt by a struggle just under his nose, so to speak. Till that moment his mind had been absorbed in the moving spectacle—moving, in both senses of the word—as he thrilled to the thought that such a vast multitude should, so many years after the war, still be eager to do homage to the fallen dead. All at once the need to maintain his equilibrium in the face of a struggle at such close quarters, brought his eyes down to fix themselves on a coarse, grimy wrist in the grip of a delicate, gloved hand. The two battled fiercely, the gloved hand showing that it was muscular and vigorous by the determined way it held on despite the vicious resistance offered.

The episode lasted only a few seconds, during which an agitated feminine voice belonging to the owner of the delicate hand, cried:

“He’s got your wallet! I saw him take it——”

And then all was over. Few showed any concern, being otherwise engaged. Peter had recovered his property from the grimy fist and allowed the culprit to escape, for other things were of greater moment. He knew that the wallet contained nothing of importance to himself or a thief, but he was greatly intrigued by the initiative and pluck of a very young girl—so she seemed. She would have slipped behind and been lost to view had he not hooked his hand within her elbow and kept her beside him.

"I am ever so much obliged to you. What can I say to thank you for saving me from unutterable loss?" said he, determined not to discount her meritorious act.

"Say nothing. I acted on an impulse—I always do, and not so fortunately. But that's me," she returned, flushing and endeavouring to escape.

"Let me see you through the crowd," said he, in matter-of-fact tones, sensing that any appearance of familiarity would be unfavourably received. "You are losing your poppies."

"Thanks," pinning on the flaming tokens of Remembrance that had become dislodged. "I am not afraid of crowds."

"They are nasty things. One hears of so many accidents. If I had a little sister, I'd never let her get mixed up in crowds."

"I'm used to them. I always see the Lord Mayor's Show, and the opening of Parliament. It's great fun."

"Nevertheless, I mean to take care of you till you are out of this one."

"Thank you," grudgingly.

He thought she was such a little thing to venture into such a heavy scrum, and wondered how she dared. But he guessed she was plucky and spirited, seeing how she had just behaved, and he glanced down at what he could see of her face—a small, snub nose of the devil-may-care variety which was specially attractive to men, and a mouth given to laughter at the corners. Nothing beautiful in so much of the face, but when she looked up at him for a moment to refute an argument he purposely put forward, he forgot the shape of her nose in wonder at her eyes. They were—"gorgeous" was the only word applicable at the moment. Nondescript in colour, black lashed and vigorously expressive.

They came in sight of refreshment rooms and Peter suggested coffee as the day was damp and chilly; but the girl refused firmly, and he was inclined to think it was more because he was a stranger and she obviously a lady, than any disinclination she might have had for refreshment. However, she added something like an after-thought

that was calculated to soften the snub and comfort his feelings.

"I have to go on to my job and cannot waste any more time." She did not want him to think her suspicious and silly. She had done him a service and he had naturally wanted to be friendly. Peter thought he understood. Nice girl!

She was making for the Underground and, as the crowd thinned, disengaging herself from his hold.

"Do you take your train here? So do I," said he, and seeing that she was producing a pass, he lost no time in taking his ticket to East Ham, glad that the noise was too great for her to hear him name the unlikely destination. He breathed more comfortably as he seated himself beside her in her compartment, for, at least, he could observe her better and try to learn something about her, which he felt impelled to do, she being a distinctly attractive personality and worth cultivating. He liked the proud carriage of her head and erect back, her quick, decided movements which told that she was one who knew her own mind and lost no time in hesitation. She had admitted to impulsiveness, and he liked her the better for that. People about them in that oscillating carriage might have imagined them acquaintances, for they conversed naturally. Only Peter noticed that there was no coquetry or encouragement in the steady glance of her eyes or the tones of her cool, composed voice. He had met with coquetry and encouragement daily in his tours around London and had been repelled.

He wondered who she was, her name, her family connections? Why should they not make friends, even if the manner of it was unorthodox? He believed she would make a delightful companion once the artificial restraint that held her aloof and reserved, melted away. But conventions were strong and girls were taught, very rightly, to be suspicious of strange men. How was he to convince her that he was not a wolf in sheep's clothing?

"London is a very queer place," said he, rather pathetically.

"Why do you say that?" she was curious enough to ask.

"Because you can be as lonely in London as on a desert island. I have returned from the East after six years' absence, and I find I am absolutely alone and friendless."

He could not have pitched upon anything more calculated to intrigue her interest in him, and saw her head jerk round and her eyes inspect him while he studiously read the advertisement concerning Amami opposite.

"Haven't you friends in London?" He enjoyed listening to her clear, fresh voice, full of *timbre* and sweetness. It was a cultured voice and required no backing.

"I used to have—heaps. But they have all scattered to different parts of the globe. Fellows who used to be at school with me are either married or dead, if not lost to all ken."

"But—surely——"

"Eh?"

"I can't imagine such a case. Surely there is someone in this country who wants to be hospitable to you—someone you used to know—even friends home, like yourself, from the East—by which I suppose you mean India?"

"Malaya," said he.

She blinked in puzzlement. "Isn't that India?"

"Not—quite. It's a peninsula——"

"Where rubber is grown," she interrupted triumphantly. "I know that, for I hear so much about rubber slumping and the share market being depressed——"

"Bravo! I am also depressed accordingly, for I am up to my neck in rubber."

"Poor you! And now you are in London for a holiday?"

"That's right. A much-needed holiday; but unfortunately I have no one to play with." He looked at her out of the corner of his eye in hopes of encouragement. Her lips curved slightly more upward than was natural to them and a dimple was sternly repressed.

"You must be desperately fed up. I expect you will be thinking of going on the continent. You won't do badly, for you'll meet heaps of English people wintering abroad; and the Alps, round about Christmas, are very attractive. We used to winter abroad regularly till—last year," her voice dropped and her face fell.



He saw at once that she was skirting a tragedy, for the laughter died instantly and her eyes grew very grave. Who were the "We" she alluded to?

"No. I shall not winter abroad, for I have a married sister at Hove who expects me to make her home my headquarters. It is very dull at the seaside in November, and I can't see having a good time at Hove."

"Oh, but you will. She will introduce you to her friends, and there are sure to be dances. I suppose you dance? Most girls do, and you won't have any life unless you can dance."

"I used to dance, but in the past six years have seen very few ballrooms. Polo has been more in my line—football and tennis, too. In my part of the world one is dog-tired at nine o'clock, and glad to get to bed. But I shall take your advice and brush up my dancing."

"Well, I hope you'll have a good time," said she quite patronisingly as she rose, for the train was stopping at a station and, apparently, she meant to get out.

"Are you getting out here?" said he. "That's lucky, for so am I. We can continue the argument as you walk to your destination."

There was no argument, and a smile flickered across her face. She gave a grab at a strap as the brakes were applied and swayed into Peter's arms for the fraction of a second, regained her balance and made swiftly for the platform among a crowd of departing passengers, Peter close behind. Instead of hurrying towards the exit with the others, Peter saw her hesitate while the hurrying crowds brushed past her.

"Have you forgotten anything?" he asked, ready to dash back into the carriage and fetch it for her. In the meantime the guard was slamming doors and the train was again in motion.

"No," said she mischievously, "but I made a mistake. This is not my station. Good-bye," and springing into the carriage which was rapidly gaining speed, risking her life or a prosecution had the official been looking her way, Peter saw her carried out of sight as the train dived into the tunnel.

He had been too taken aback to know how to act, or he might have followed her example and boarded a coach lower down, whatever the penalty, but "he who hesitates is lost", was brought home to him very poignantly when he realised that he had no possible means of following up the acquaintance so curiously begun. He had not learned the name of the business that employed her, her reserve was so commendable. He did not even know her name, yet was powerfully drawn towards her, he hardly knew why, since she was not distractingly beautiful. On the contrary, some people might consider her plain. A pale little thing with big eyes and a dauntless nerve. There was, however, something unusual about her. A quality that belonged to her individuality and set her apart from most girls of the day, who, like herself, were independent and self-supporting. Girls who filled trains and omnibuses daily on their way to and from their work in town and city.

He, who had a passionate love of beauty, who had spent an hour before the Venus de Milo drinking in the exquisite curves of that marble shape, who could stand indefinitely watching the glories of an Eastern sunset, or the grace of a Pavlova, found himself giving all his thoughts for the rest of that day to a pair of indescribably expressive eyes in an insignificant face, and warming to the memory of low, sweet tones from a laughter-loving mouth, anything but faultless in its provoking lines. It was no rosebud, nor cupid's bow, and the corners had an upward tilt as from a natural sense of humour. Yet he had seen a sudden wave of sadness damp the smiles, and it had been as if clouds had effaced the sunlight.

His susceptibility was the effect, he told himself, of loneliness and disappointment. A disillusioned holiday, begun full of hope, and discovered to be barren and profitless. It seemed that England had little use for those of her children who forsake her shores in quest of fortune.

He had come home more to satisfy the ache of nostalgia than for a good time, the fortune still unmade, though he had succeeded in establishing himself as the owner of a small though promising rubber estate in Malaya. But rubber was slumping, along with other industries, through

over-production and the thousand reasons that were forthcoming to account for the world-wide depression, and Peter was aware that he would have to go slow on holiday, exercising a certain amount of wisdom when pleasure-seeking, so that he should not return to his estate utterly "broke", as so many of his neighbours proudly confessed themselves at the end of a joyous six months' leave.

Peter's personal tastes were simple. He was accustomed to deprivation, and could be happy given the right companionship, even if he had little to spend. Of one thing he was assured, and it was the need to remember that whatever happened, he must not marry. Girls were charming contributors to all that went to make what is known as a good time, but they could only be playmates, and however sore a heart one of them might occasion, he must still remember to keep clear of marriage. Few English-bred girls would take to plantation life in Malaya, and he was determined not to enter upon the unequal partnership the East offered husbands and wives. Such was the position when Peter Dunbar tried to pick up old threads on his return home after six years' absence, and it was not surprising, he told himself, that he should be "fed up to the back teeth" with his days, and ready to fall a prey to the first adventure with an unknown girl and behave without warning like a "curb crawler".

After an unspeakably dull afternoon he made his way to the club of which he was an Overseas member, and waited for his brother-in-law, George Nicholl, to pick him up on his way back to Hove.

George, who had married his only sister and the one relative he now possessed in England, was struggling hard to keep his business afloat in bad times, and rigid economy was the rule in his home at Hove, where he had taken a villa for his wife and infants that the temptations of London might not cause heartburnings. Mrs. Nicholl, being wise and sympathetic, adapted herself to their straitened circumstances and took her pleasures simply. She dispensed with the service of a Nannie, and, in the double duties of house-keeping and rearing babies, she had little time for repining.

"It's not so bad, but it might be worse," she told Peter on his arrival in England. "We have good health, youth, and may hope for better times. It is a great thing to be hopeful. The main thing is, we must keep George's pecker up. One of us, at least, must be an optimist." And she turned her winter coat and patched the fur collar with a piece bought at a Brighton store, and kept smiling.

George arrived in his two-seater, and Peter getting in, they drove along the Brighton Road cheerfully. George's cheerfulness was no indication of improved business conditions. The thought of returning to Kit and domestic felicity brought the light back into his eyes which had been partly extinguished by disappointments all day.

"How are things to-day?" asked Peter, lighting a cigarette for George and one for himself.

"So-so. I guess it is a long lane that has no turning. The new year is sure to bring a change for the better. At least it might bring us a change of Government, what?"

"Things can hardly be worse for the country than they are."

"Every fool can see that but those who won't. How have you done? Had a good time?"

"Particularly rotten. I nearly had my pocket picked after leaving the Cenotaph, but for a girl's initiative. She grabbed the blighter's wrist as he was making off with my wallet."

"Good job!"

"It was. Nice kid, she seems."

"Who was she?"

"Dunno. Lost her after a bit. One can't chase a lady in the town. She was distinctly that."

"You might come across her again, that is if you want to. You meet people unexpectedly."

"And you don't—the right people—in a lifetime. I should like to know who she is, for she showed a quick mind and some initiative."

"I wish one could introduce you to some nice girls. The best we know are engaged or married. A good few are no earthly use to any fellow. However, see what

Kit has to say. She seems to have a brain wave and is nursing it."

"Oh, don't worry about me. I'm not keen on introductions. I shall only get drawn into spending more money than I can afford, and God knows how things will go out there presently."

"That's true. Besides, if it's not marriage you are after, no good getting soft on some girl, which is more than likely, as you are human and a normal fellow, quite capable of falling to a vamp or a pretty face. The world doesn't breed a lot of Kits, you know, and she's one in a thousand. I couldn't wish you a better wife, old man, than your sister makes me."

"Placed as I am, it would be a mistake to marry. No girl would care for the life out there, with all its drawbacks." Peter shook his head resolutely, though at the back of his mind his soul hankered for a wife who would be an ideal companion to him in the loneliness of the plantation, and he would have loved a kiddie or two of his own. If he didn't become a father in his early thirties, no good thinking of it later, for the joy of having children was to see them grow up, and to live again in their lives. But what did marriage in Malaya and such places amount to in the end? A husband slaving himself to death to keep a wife at home or in the hills, children in schools in England, and no thanks for the self-sacrifice and slavery. In many cases, he had seen the wife "carry on" in a hill station with some other fellow, while the patient dupe who supplied her with the means to keep her health and her youth only had her bored society for short spells. Love died; loyalty, stretched to its limits, perished also; nothing remained but the children to keep mutual interests alive, and they were never grateful and seldom loving. Peter decided, mentally, that the thought of marriage would have to be postponed till he made enough money to give up trying to make it in rubber, at least.

Even if a woman were ready to face the climatic ills of the peninsula, her health might fail, and he could not see himself hold on to her for selfish reasons if her life were being sapped by malaria.

It took years to get acclimatised, which he knew to his cost, and he would hate to watch a beloved wife suffer and lose her looks in the attempt to do her duty.

"I have known several women who have thrown in their lot with the men they have loved and married, only to return home after the birth of the first child, and wild horses could not take her back again. I am not speaking of the military crowd. They don't have too bad a time and are bored stiff at home," George ruminated. "At the same time, girls are mad-keen on marrying fellows from India, and are ready to say 'yes' if asked. They pretty-well know what they are up against, but they argue that others have done it, why not they? And they add to the long list of broken homes and divorce cases."

Kit received her two men with drinks and a cosy fire. She sat on the arm of George's chair and made plans. "I am taking Peter to-morrow to Mrs. Everard's tea-party. He'll probably be the only man, but all the better for his vanity. Peter is suffering from the inferiority complex and needs reassuring. Malaya has made him *jungli*. He loves the ladies, dear heart! but he's frightened of them."

("Not much," thought Peter, grinning in memory of his pursuit of the wallet-girl.)

"You are afraid of girls, Peter! You know you have shirked meeting them just because you don't know what to say to them!"

"If I could take them on one at a time, I should manage to behave all right. But it is asking a lot to be the one man at a bun-fight, and beautiful women focussing him with attentions. I don't think you'd better take me. I'll break valuable china or spill tea on someone's best frock."

"You never do. I want to show you off, you idiot! What's the good of a big brother, home from the East and everyone agog to make his acquaintance, if he's eternally haunting London?"

"What's there to show off?" said George. "He's nothing to look at now that he is normally well dressed since visiting my tailor, and feeds like a civilised being."

"Indeed!" cried Kit. "Peter's fine. I know all the girls will be weak at sight of his brown, intriguing face and the way his hair won't lie straight. Peter's big, too, and we all love a good physique in a man, and then, being my brother, he can't help being attractive"—and she made a grimace at George.

"He'll be a target to be shot at all right, dear girl, so if you're so anxious for trouble, trot him out."

"I don't want dear old Peter to be troubled," said Kit. "That is why I haven't mentioned the Cowens, you observe. I discreetly give them a miss when I send Peter to look up possible acquaintances in town."

"Who are the Cowens?" asked Peter, putting down his glass immediately.

"Look at him pricking up his ears!" said George.

"Who are they?"

"That's a long story," sighed Kit, renouncing her husband's knee as she heard the wail of an infant overhead. "I am sure Bunny is awake! How excitable he is. Just because I told him Uncle Peter would be coming to stay a bit. If you'll excuse me I'll go and see what he wants."

Kit vanished, and as George remembered a good story in relation to his son and heir, Peter's question concerning the Cowens remained unanswered.

## CHAPTER II

### AN INTRODUCTION

ON Sunday morning, the view from the bay window of the Nicholls' villa residence was typical of November, with a fine drizzle falling and bad visibility. The distant sound of the sea came as a background of drums to a monotonous sonata. Even golf with George was impossible, for which he was not unthankful, for it gave him a long morning in bed.

Bunny sat at the breakfast table learning to feed himself and incidentally smearing his face and his feeder with egg from the back of the diminutive spoon, while Mimi, the baby, crowed noisily from a befrilled bassinet in front of the glowing grate.

"Darling!—not like that, like this," said Bunny's mother, intervening in time to save the contents of the spoon from being emptied into her offspring's lap. "You see, Peter," she continued after the interruption, "it is inevitable. The world doesn't stand still. You never wrote and kept up old friendships, so naturally you find you are out of touch. You hear this one is in America, that one in South Africa, another is dead, some are married and have domestic ties that make you feel an intruder. What about Lila Wakefield? You and Laurence were very friendly right up to your going to Cambridge."

"Laurie is in China, and his sister married Blake, a brain specialist. They have a house at Hampstead, and he had his consulting-rooms in Harley Street," said Peter, cutting into an apple. "I called Lila up on the telephone and her housekeeper said she was in Paris. Expected to return a fortnight hence."

"She'll probably entertain you on her return and that will open the way——"

"I wish you wouldn't harp, old thing, on my entertainment. I have given up caring about the old crowd and am utterly indifferent to entertainment. Believe me, I am perfectly happy——"

"You are not! Don't pretend you are having a good time when we do nothing at all—can't afford to, that's the truth," and she gulped. "It is natural for you to have a hankering for a jolly time, and you are being bored stiff——"

"I'm not!"

"You are. The weather, too, prevents golf and things."

"You are awfully sweet to trouble about me, Kit. But I dare say I'll survive till I'm due to return. It's nice having seen the old country again, even if I am a bit friendless and a back number."

"When are you going to visit those people who came



home with you? You said they had asked you to Scotland."

"Oh, the Armitages? We have identical interests out in Malaya, but I don't know that I shall bother till the spring. I'll get a car, I think. I meant to, last week, but don't want to spend too much."

Kit named a few makes that were reasonably moderate, and Peter thought he would look in at Barkley's show-rooms in Brighton and fix one up without delay. He had been three weeks in England and had come to the conclusion that being without a car was a handicap. One had to get about, and half the fun of being at home was in seeing what one could of the country, whatever the season.

"By the way, you mentioned people the other night—the Cowens—as if they were labelled 'dangerous'. Who are they?"

"They are innocent enough, poor things—except one who is too pretty for everyday life. But it would hardly be any use putting you on to them, for they might prove more of liabilities than assets. You are bound to treat the girls, and that would rush you into expenses not good for your pocket."

"I could stand a bit in that line. Within reason. Explain, old dear. What about them? Who are they, and what are they? Where are they? How many are there?"

"Give us a chance! How many more questions do you want answered?"

"I want to know all about them. You said it was a 'long story'."

"Did I? That was in reference to their collapse." Kit reflected where to begin in her recital. "Didn't you ever hear of Mr. Hamilton Cowen, who came a cropper last year? He was supposed to be frightfully rich—had race-horses and two fine estates, as well as a house in town and a house on the river at Henley. All at once there were rumours about the companies of which he was director; things got whispered; there was run on a bank, which closed its doors. A sort of panic seemed to have been let loose. George knows more about it than I, for he lost a bit through the Cowen group of companies, the shares of

which collapsed suddenly—then all at once we heard that old Hamilton Cowen, who had a name to conjure with in the City, had shot himself in his office in Leadenhall Street. It was a great to-do. He left a widow and four daughters *absolutely penniless*. People at first thought that he had settled quite a fortune on them, but no such thing. He was a terrible gambler and had put everything into those ventures in which he honestly believed, but his enemies knocked the bottom out of the market—don't ask me to explain, as George knows more about it than I, so that the great Mr. Hamilton Cowen was ruined. Absolutely and completely. It was found afterwards that the two estates and his house in town were a drop in the ocean to all his liabilities. They went of course, and hundreds—even thousands—of people lost all they had in the smash. His own friends, too, and small holders who had saved something for their old age. It was tragic. All were ruined, and no one felt like forgiving Cowen, who was nothing but a mad gambler with immense plausibility, and not too conscientious. However, it was proved that his wife and family were absolutely on the rocks; so, at least, he had not feathered his own nest. Surely you remember reading about it?"

"I do, but it being an impersonal matter I took no interest in the details. I have even forgotten the name, though it sounded familiar. What became of the family?"

"I'll tell you. Mrs. Cowen, who must have been a very pretty woman, was twice married, the first time to a planter in India by whom she had two girls, Megan and Margot—they are Sheridans. When he died suddenly, there was nothing for his widow, but the two girls had a small legacy tied up in their name, left to them by a paternal aunt—something that yielded about twenty-five pounds a month between them—what is it? Three hundred a year? Very good pin-money when their mother married soon afterwards. Indeed, they were exceedingly well off till last year. After the smash and Cowen's death, that money was pooled by the Sheridan sisters and the whole family are living on it. Conceive the catastrophe after absolute luxury and money to burn! The younger girls,

Cowens, haven't a bean, nor the mother, and all live in that Bayswater flat as best they can. I feel so sorry for them, but Megan is wonderful. We were at school together and became very intimate, so that I can hardly imagine how she bears the change, or how she has become so efficient a housekeeper, and is so self-sacrificing. She was not cut out for the life, yet has tackled it. Margot, too, is a brick—and they deserve great credit. Megan is twenty-eight, Margot about twenty-four. The others are nineteen and seventeen, and take all the wind out of their stepsisters' sails by their beauty. They are quite the prettiest girls I have ever seen, and it is a shame that latterly Megan's chances have been spoilt by Marigold. Mignonette, called Min, is the youngest, and she bids fair when older to outrival Marigold. Both are very much spoilt by their mother, who is now a neurotic invalid, served hand and foot by Megan. What she would do without her eldest daughter I can't imagine. The second one is very independent and self-willed, but she gives a good account of herself at her job in a publisher's office. George got it for her, and could have given Megan work, only she could not be spared. Marigold won't be long on their hands, for she is frightfully run after. Everyone spoils her, and Min, too, who is getting insufferable. Megan has her work cut out looking after the lot, but Marigold can't be kept in order and gets the time of her life. Heaps of fellows would have her if she wanted any of them, but I dare say she flies high. She knew what it was to be well off, and their present poverty must be very irksome. Unfortunately, most of the boys who take her about haven't money to play with. It would mean beginning on very little, and I don't see Miss Marigold as the wife of a poor man. She is absolutely helpless, having grown used to being merely ornamental. But she is pretty, and no doubt about it."

"How were Megan's chances of matrimony spoiled by Marigold?"

"Rolly Sherwell, in the Stock Exchange, would have married her. They were all but engaged, when he was introduced to Marigold and transferred his affections. Of course, Megan isn't a bit pretty, but has twice as much character.

However, you men are no judges of women, and prefer the sparkling sinner to the stolid saint."

"What happened in the case of Sherwell?" Peter was amused and showed awakening interest.

"He still takes Marigold about, but they aren't engaged as Marigold can't make up her mind, I suppose. There is plenty of time, for she's very young, and if she's putting herself up to the highest bidder, Rolly is not rich enough for her. There is a Texas millionaire after her, someone said, but he's a common fellow."

"So you need not worry about me," said Peter laughing. "You can introduce me with an easy mind, for Marigold is not likely to look at a poor rubber planter with a mortgage on the estate and nothing but his manly beauty to recommend him."

"I am not afraid that she will marry you, for I know you would think twice before asking any girl to do that, in these hard times. But you might fall in love and be made very miserable, poor dear, when I want you to be happy and have a good time. Marigold will probably get soft about you, as any girl might. I say it, though I am your sister and have no illusions. But she is a mischievous flirt with an eye to the main chance. She has had her head turned by fellows and knows she can marry well if she waits. Just now she hasn't much chance to meet the best people, so she makes the most of second best. It's all fish that comes to her net, you know. The family can't entertain at the flat. What a difference from old times when Mrs. Cowen made quite a charming though futile hostess and had all sorts of great people at her crushes. If Megan had been half as attractive as Marigold she would have got off long ago. Margot was always contrary and fastidious, too proud to practise feminine arts on your sex, and taking no interest in men."

"If, like Megan, she is plain and uninteresting to the casual observer, men probably left her alone."

"There you are quite wrong. Oh, Bunny darling! I have neglected my precious. Does he want a taste of marmalade, ducky?" Kit spread a slice of bread with marmalade and continued where she had left off. "You are

quite wrong to imagine that Margot is unattractive. She grows on you and has a charm all her own if you have the time to discover it. But she hasn't much use for the men she meets and refuses to come into competition with her step-sisters. Not that Min is as yet old enough to be considered marriageable. But she's a forward minx, and I abominate her especially for her treatment of Megan, to whom she owes everything."

"Meantime they all are birds in their little nests who never agree."

"That's the pity of it. It isn't the step-sisters who bully the younger ones, but the younger ones who get things all their own way."

"When will you introduce me?" asked Peter, quite ready to explore his opportunities for entertainment among the derelict family of Cowen, the financier. "Can't you 'phone up and say you are sending your dear brother to call? You can say that I am lately home from the East and just a bit shy in the up-take, so they can be prepared, and will let me down gently."

"They haven't a 'phone. Can't afford it. Some neighbours generally allow the Cowens to use theirs, on the floor above. You can call, for they know all about you and that you were expected home. But, please, if you must run about with one of them, don't let it be Marigold, for she has much the best time of them all and is always at shows and dances, ever since they took the flat. Most of their friends dropped them after the smash, as it was hard to forgive the gigantic fraud—for it was nothing but a wild gamble. But a few, mainly men, find Marigold irresistible, so they still hover like bees round the honey-pot. I feel sorry for Megan, for she is the willing horse that is worked the hardest, and there isn't a finer character, for the way she puts up with her step-sisters and her exacting mother and, with Margot's help, supports them all, is past understanding. Just think if she married and cleared out, if Margot was ill and couldn't work, where would they all be? Marigold would have to marry the first man who proposed, instead of picking and chosing and playing at love, and Min would be forced to earn her living as a shopgirl—she

isn't fit for anything else, for neither of the Cowen girls troubled about getting educated. Mrs. Cowen had them at home with a governess in the great days of plenty, and brought them up to think only of getting married. Mrs. Cowen is the limit! She never realises what she owes her elder daughters and takes their devotion for granted. If left suddenly to her own resources, she would have to be put into a house of charity where decayed gentlewomen are mercifully looked after."

"I'll offer to take Megan to the theatre. Will that please you?"

"I hope you will, and not become one of the bees round the honey-pot."

As a result of this conversation, Peter drove to London the moment he had bought his car, an occasional four, since he might have on occasion to be reluctantly generous with his offers of a lift, and found his way to Bayswater. He was sorry for the Cowens and the Sheridans—the entire family, for that matter, as he could appreciate the contrast between the life they had known and the one they were now living. Even Marigold, who was given a reasonable amount of treats, must feel the pinch, as there was no money to waste on fripperies, and when fashions changed so rapidly, she must chafe at having to make the old things do. Twenty-five pounds a month between the lot of them was nothing but a pittance, and out of that, after the rent was paid and catering budgeted for, what could possibly be left over for clothing, incidentals and pleasure for the five of them? It was appalling, particularly as none of them had been brought up to economise or want for anything. A real tragedy!

Peter's warm heart melted towards the unfortunate family till he wished he was full of riches that he might do something for them all, even if it meant marrying one of them and taking care of the rest. Anyhow, it was possible, if he practised self-denial in many secret ways, to bring a little brightness into their young lives—at least, into the lives of the elder ones, for it seemed they had no chance in competition with the lovely Marigold, who did not lack for admirers.

Things were turning out very differently from his anticipations when he had sailed, full of hope, for the land of his birth. New friends were offered him in the place of the old, and all was changed—people, places, manners, things. Nothing had remained the same. Flappers had grown up, and nothing was so surprising as when he met the small schoolgirls of six years ago, and found them wheeling perambulators with babies of their own. Manners were deteriorating. Modern girls were sophisticated and impudent, cultivating sex-attraction in place of accomplishments, and taking the lead with men. Old chums were scattered over the globe, and with London business men he had little in common; their narrow interests, confined to their special lines of commerce, bored him exceedingly. Bad times had taken the heart out of them and life had no compensations as in the East, where a polo-stick, a gun, and the element of personal danger, eternally menacing, makes enterprise a great adventure.

London, though much the same, was definitely changing. Old landmarks were disappearing, old sites had a new aspect. Piccadilly Circus was unrecognisable, with a maze of entrances and exits, showrooms and escalators under the Circus, that was bewildering. Above, the one-way traffic was something he had to get used to, with the same hurry-scurry, the same rush and roar, and white lines at familiar crossings to give one pause, and hint of "safety first". People looked very much the same, only many were shabbier, but still they pushed and jostled each other where buses stopped; and still they looked into shop windows, though it was said that trade was bad. Never had he seen so many idlers hanging about the Embankment and street corners, or lounging about parks, seedy-looking fellows living on the dole and hating their fellow-creatures in self-defence.

It was a sinister London he had come back to, with newsboys shouting the latest football results, while headlines announcing peace conferences, naval disarmament, and fresh unemployment figures fluttered on posters at their legs. Yet, in spite of vanishing prosperity, trade depression, a disintegrating Empire, and loss of prestige,

the theatres were always full, and picture houses advertising Talkies turned people away, while at midnight the West End blazed with electric signs turning night into day as pleasure-seekers thronged the streets or rolled by in expensive cars. Peter had never seen so many Rolls-Royces at one moment in his life as when he walked in theatre-land at midnight; and he came to the conclusion that it was not that there was no money for trade, but that people were afraid to invest it while the Government of the country was in the hands of the declared enemies of capital.

However, he, personally, was not concerned with the problem as he drove to Bayswater, feeling grateful to Kit for having found a solution to his boredom. He was to be given a whole family of nice girls to play with, having been warned before hand not to lose his heart to Marigold, the prettiest of them all.

Peter, like most men on a holiday, could easily have found some amiable woman to companion him had he not been fastidious in his tastes with regard to the sex. Strange women with scarlet lips and manufactured beauty were ready to make friends with him in public places, wanting little encouragement to be all things to a lonely man fresh from abroad. But such parasites jarred him and he had avoided them like the plague, relentlessly showing each and all that there was "nothing doing" as far as he was concerned. Vulgarity always had the effect of sending him into his shell like a snail, and of the two types he preferred the shy, ingenuous, native woman of the East under circumstances when women were a necessary diversion in a man's life.

As he neared the address Kit had given him, Peter warmed to the adventure, for he did not deny to himself his curiosity concerning the girl called Marigold, for the obvious reason that he had been warned against her wiles. She was beautiful, and, consequently, a flirt. Peter smiled, as he had a great susceptibility towards beauty in any form, and was tolerant towards flirts who were beautiful and refined, for his sex was responsible for the failing. Men flattered and made love to pretty girls and, in a way, taught them to flirt. Poor little Marigold!—her very name



was intriguing—why blame her for enjoying an innocent pastime? Men were capable of looking after themselves. The fun of a flirtation was that it was admittedly insincere from the start, and could be indulged in like a game played with all the cards on the table. Forewarned was forearmed, and he was prepared to admire Marigold and be amused. He was far too modest to imagine, for a moment, that so lovely and popular a young woman would take the slightest interest in one placed as he, for the family had been acquainted with his position—so Kit had said—and were under no illusions. The inferiority complex was already in possession of him as he neared Kremlin Crescent, wondering if he would have to face the family collectively, or singly? He hoped he would be received by the self-sacrificing Megan and made to feel at home before any of the others appeared. Mrs. Cowen was an invalid, he understood, so he had little hopes of meeting her.

The names, "Megan, Margot, Marigold and Min", rang musically in his ears as he turned into the Crescent and examined the façades of the tall houses, many of which were let in flats. "Megan, Margot, Marigold and Min", harmonised like a chime of bells ringing to call him to rescue them from utter desolation—if not Marigold, then the others who had dropped out of everything and never got "treated". Funny that Mrs. Cowen should have named her girls so fantastically—but she was, from what he gathered, a rather weak-minded person who had gone down to her calamity like a ninepin. Her sort would choose alliteration when naming her offspring!

The house indicated in the written address had three floors and a basement, with area railings and a short flight of steps leading to the hall door. A row of electric buttons beside it had visiting cards against them, and Mrs. Hamilton Cowen's being the groundfloor bell, Peter pressed it with feelings slightly stirred and anticipatory.

While waiting for the door to open, he heard voices within raised in angry argument—women's voices—two, he was sure, both sounding too wrathful to be discreet. He wondered if they were any of the Cowen crowd, or other lodgers?

Not to hear words, he tried to whistle a tune, blushing for the combatants, for he was sure they could not possibly dream they were being overheard.

Suddenly the door opened in his face and with it came a sentence down the hall from a room beyond, shrieked in exasperation:

"Oh, go to blazes! For heaven-sake shut that kitchen door, the smell is poisonous! Anyone would think we had committed murder, and were boiling the remains——" The rest was lost, for Peter spoke to an old woman in the doorway, who looked the typical charwoman in an overall and handkerchief tied round her head.

"Is Mrs. Cowen at home?"

"That's right, sir, but she don't see nobody. It's Miss Megan that's in, and may be the other two young ladies. Will ye be for coming in?" She spoke with a strong Irish accent and politely stood aside, inviting him to enter.

"Thank you," said Peter, wiping his feet carefully on the cocoanut mat so as to give the sisters time to recover, as an eloquent silence proclaimed a cessation of hostilities, though certain shufflings and scrapings betrayed the fact that the room was undergoing some form of lightning treatment.

## CHAPTER III

### HOUSEKEEPING

A TALL window, with panes that would have been the better for a visit from the window-cleaner, admitted the dull daylight into Mrs. Cowen's little bedroom, and long casement curtains of rich silk damask—relics of departed glory—shed a lustre of refinement on the limited space which was crowded with anomalies. There was a handsome, walnut-wood bedstead standing on cheap linoleum; soft, expensive rugs to trip the unwary, a monster antique wardrobe and a dressing-table to match, the latter crowded with expensive toilet requisites, an upholstered

easy chair close to the gas-fire; an old ottoman by the wall, with no room to pass round the bed without squeezing between it and the furniture, while on the bedside-table was an electric reading-lamp with a brown-paper shade, a novel and a bottle of smelling salts. Cheap wall-paper stared down distractingly on the room with impossible bunches of purple iris lilies mathematically designed, and repeated continuously for the mental aberration of the occupant, who, in times of sickness, could find diversion in calculating the bunches per roll, or in tracing a path between each bouquet.

There is nothing, however, you cannot grow used to, as Mrs. Cowen proved, when she no longer allowed the pattern of the wallpaper to interfere with her peace of mind, and even ceased to know there was any pattern on it at all. Being absorbed in diagnosing every fresh symptom of bodily disorder, such a minor matter as garish, wall decoration was easily forgotten.

On this afternoon, a noxious odour proceeding from the kitchen, and finding its way through the chinks of the door, obliged her to lay aside her novel with a look of disgust, and sniff at the air. What was Meg about to allow anything so vulgar to happen? Never had her delicate nostrils been so assailed before!

She pressed the button of the bell-push and sighed, holding her handkerchief to her nose. While waiting for her summons to be answered, her eyes strayed to the mirror on the mantelpiece, which was set at such an angle that she could have the satisfaction of seeing how she looked among her pillows, and it was a matter for inward satisfaction that, however much she suffered physically, she could still make a pretty picture lying back among her befrilled pillows and surrounded by dainty bedclothes. Her nightdress, too, was lovely. How glad she was that she had pretty things for, at least, these were her own and could not be taken from her. She could still be delightfully picturesque whenever her doctor came to see her and hold her hand in his dear, sympathetic, bedside manner.

She rather liked her boudoir-cap—this one with the

mauve ribbons and Mechlin-lace drooping over the ears. Bridget was a wonderful maid! How terribly she missed her . . . but what was the use of repining? Poverty was inexorable, and she had, at least, to be thankful for possessing such virtuous children and a good doctor. Dear me, why didn't Megan come?

She rang again, her features twisting sympathetically to the repugnance she suffered at the penetrating odour. Was it necessary to concoct such appalling smells because one had to do one's own work? A flat had its drawbacks in respect to the odours that could never be confined to the kitchen. But to——

Bang! Clash! Clatter!

Something metallic had fallen in the kitchen, which, fortunately, was situated on the other side of the hall and behind the main staircase, whence too often proceeded annoyances inseparable from domestic activities.

Mrs. Cowen clutched the bed clothes despairingly. Would no one consider her nerves? How clumsy to make all that unholy noise over a simple matter of hanging up the pots and pans.

However, the door opened and a flushed face was thrust into the room.

"Whatever do you want, Mummy, just when I have my hands full?" sounded exasperated.

"My dear," Mrs. Cowen spoke temperately, "I simply had to call someone to ask about that dreadful smell. Must you——"

"I'm boiling dishcloths. Mrs. Grabbitt says that dishcloths never have to be sent to the laundry, and can be washed at home. For all these months the laundry have charged——"

"Never mind, never mind! I only do beg of you not to let the smell go all over the house. You probably have the kitchen door open——"

"I had to open it as the place was full of steam. What's the matter with the smell? It won't last for ever."

"Oh, do something about it. Give me my salts, and open all the windows, quick."

"I'll open the top a wee bit. Presently you will be

chilled and want me to come back and shut it. This is Monday and washing day, so that I can't spare a minute."

"Why *must* you wash on Monday?" sighed Mrs. Cowen as Megan pulled down the sash a trifle.

"Everybody who keeps house has to. One must keep to a routine or nothing would be done. Mrs. Grabbitt says——"

"Don't quote a charwoman to me as if I know nothing about keeping house! All I know is that I never smelt dishcloths in my life, and it is hard to be obliged to suffer such torture when I am in poor health and need all the good air possible. Doctor Manning said only yesterday——"

"Don't quote Doctor Manning to me, the old quack! He keeps up the idea that you are sick, when it should be his duty to get you well and about."

"Don't be unfair, Megan. He's most conscientious and sympathetic, and has the largest practice in Bayswater of any doctor."

"Because he cultivated that bedside manner his patients like. There! Do you want anything more?"

"I don't, thank you," stiffly. "One would think I was pretending to be sick. Is it any advantage to be cooped up in a room day and night?"

"Doctor Manning said you have nothing *organically* wrong, so I do think you might make an effort to get up."

"I always said that you were the most unsympathetic of all my children. Marigold is so different!"

"I can't stop to discuss Marigold or anything else, or Min will be dropping more pans about and smashing dishes. I never knew anyone so unhandy." She had reached the door when Mrs. Cowen remarked plaintively:

"I suppose there is no one to change my library books to-day?"

"Have you got through them all, so soon?"

"I am finishing the last and will have nothing for to-night, but if it's inconvenient, I'll wait," she sighed to indicate a pathetic willingness to be sacrificed to the common good.

"I'll tell Marigold. She's doing nothing of importance, and it's time she was useful."

"How you misunderstand her! Poor Marigold is always busy with her needle. Only this morning she showed me how her left forefinger was disfigured with pricks. It is an all-time job to do the household mending . . ."

"That's why she leaves it alone," snapped Megan. "All she is working at is the beautification of her person. Turning two frocks into one and remodelling gowns to wear at dances."

"That must keep her busy. She has to do them, for we can't afford to supply her needs. What in the world is to happen when she has to get a trousseau, heaven knows. I'll have to sell jewellery, I suppose. Don't trouble her if she's busy."

"So am I, and so is Min. Must we always give way to Marigold?"

Mrs. Cowen looked helplessly at her eldest daughter. "Can't you spare Min? It will do her good to get out."

"Let Min out, with any excuse, and she'll stay out; looking into shop windows and attracting the attention of men. Min has the soul of a skivvy and would pick up anything in trousers if you give her a chance."

"For shame, Megan! And the poor child little more than a babe!"

"There's no babe about Min. She knows all there is to know, and could teach any girl of her age. Marigold has seen to that, making a confidante of her over her love affairs, and working up the kid's imagination unto unheard of precocity."

"You always blame Marigold."

"Don't they share the same room? And don't I often hear them gossiping and giggling over Marigold's stories till late into the night? That's why neither wants to get up in the morning. Marigold doesn't do Min any good, take it from me."

"Poor Marigold! People need to go to you for her character. Isn't it natural for two girls to chatter about their conquests, I ask you?"

"Marigold's conquests. It's too early for Min to begin. However, I'll send Min to you. Tell her to come straight back as I will need her help in the kitchen. I'm tired to

death, yet have to keep on. You little know what a lot there is to do when you have a char only twice a week, and have all the work of the house on your shoulders with such inefficient help as Min gives and Marigold rebelling when she is asked to brush and sweep."

"It's her hands—she has such pretty hands—just like mine. I was always proud of my hands. Your father used to say that they were models, and Mr. Cowen was weak about the way the tips turn up." She spread her fingers before her admiringly, and gems flashed iridescent lights. Mrs. Cowen could never be persuaded to part with her jewellery, as they were a passion with her. Any hint that the sacrifice of a few rings and brooches might make things easier for a time, fell on deaf ears.

Megan did not stay to comment on the beauty of her mother's hands or Marigold's care of her own, but returned to the kitchen to find Min devouring an account of a divorce trial in the *News of the World*, in which Mrs. Grabbitt had brought a lettuce from a greengrocer's van round the corner, while the offending dishcloths, having exhausted the water in which they were boiling, were hopelessly burned and emitting an even more noxious odour than ever.

It was more than human nature could bear. Three out of the six new dishcloths in use, burned beyond recovery!

"I don't know what you deserve!" Megan almost wept in her rage.

"Serve you right for boiling them when a little soap-flakes would have been enough to clean them!" retorted the unrepentant flapper.

"This is not the time to be reading the papers—and rubbish at that!" and Megan snatched the paper from Min, who struggled to retain it rebelliously and received a stinging slap on her cheek, after which she rushed from the kitchen declaring that it was the last time she would ever do anything for Megan again.

She wept stormily on a chair in her mother's room, secure in the knowledge of moral support, and Mrs. Cowen was able for a while to forget her own delicate health in the effort to soothe her baby's wounded feelings.

"I won't be bullied!"

"Of course not, darling. But perhaps Meggy is tired and being tired is short-tempered?"

"I don't care! She makes work, boiling those beastly——"

"Baby love, does your cheek smart? It is so red. Put some cream on it. I have that delicious stuff Margot gave me on my birthday. There, by the bottle of Eau de Cologne."

Min stepped over to the dressing-table and peering at her one crimson cheek, sullenly smeared it with cream and powder, her fond mother looking on from the bed, thinking all the while that her darling was growing prettier every day. Just a little too plump, perhaps, but that was to be expected at seventeen. She would fine down later.

"I was wondering whether you or Marigold are most like what I was at your age," she remarked thoughtfully. "I had fair hair like Marigold's. Yours is too dark, but I had your round, baby-face—Marigold's is oval."

"I hope I have a better nose, Mums, for yours is decidedly pug, dearest. Marigold and I have dad's patrician contour."

"I may have a short nose, but men go daft about *rétroussé* noses in girls. No one called mine a 'pug' before!"

"Don't be offended, darling! I was only joking. You have the sweetest button in the world, turned up at the tip deliciously, and giving you that look of 'the eternal feminine' most he-men adore." And Min flew to the bed and kissed the organ on the point to make up, which made Mrs. Cowen simper like a school-girl and dwell on the superiority of *rétroussé* noses over those boasting of a bridge.

"Don't go!" as Min was about to retire from the scene. "Did Megan tell you about my library books? No? Then you are to return them. When your face cools down, take them to the Library and get what you can. Nothing heavy, darling, but light and interesting."

"Hot stuff? The girl said that she had a book under the counter which she could offer customers with discretion."

"What do you know about that sort?"



"My lovely Mum!—don't imagine I am still an infant."

"Get me what you like," said Mrs. Cowen blushing, for Min took her breath away. Modern girls were all ahead of their times, but perhaps it was safer that they should know everything so as to be able to steer clear of pitfalls. "Only, dearest, you are to come straight back and not loiter."

In the meantime, Megan having discovered that a certain ingredient for to-morrow's steak and kidney pudding was likely to fall short, she went in search of Marigold, an air of determination on her face, for she was prepared for opposition and meant to overcome it ruthlessly.

A bit breathless from having swabbed and splashed and dripped and polished till the last plate was in the rack, the kitchen restored to order, and the burned dish-cloths left to steam reproachfully in the ruined pan as an object lesson to ineptitude, she arrived in the living-room to find Marigold kneeling before a ball-gown which was slung on a hanger from the electrolier, which she concentrated on the fall of a flounce.

It was the largest of the rooms the flat possessed and served as dining and drawing-room combined. A round table which had once occupied the centre of a loggia at the Henley house, was a compromise that served for meals and other requirements of the family. At the moment it was strewn with reels of cotton, scraps of material, a work-basket, cutting-out scissors, magazines of fashion, and odds and ends, the overflow of which lay on the carpet. A fire burned in the grate, two high windows were partly shrouded by delicate lace curtains, and roller-blinds dangled tassels midway. Easy chairs of opulent appearance spoke of bygone times, likewise the carpet that covered the entire floor, but the wallpaper was again an offence to good taste and stared in floral design between old prints in heavy, ebony frames.

"I say, did you get me the stores I asked you to call for at Munsey's in the Grove?" said Megan.

"They said they would send up," Marigold replied, with her mouth full of pins.

"Oh, well, I want you to run out again for a packet of suet. I have to have it, and there won't be enough dripping till we have another joint next week. Can't you drop that for a while and go?" Surely, for once in a way, Marigold might be obliging!

"I couldn't. *Imposs!* This frock is to be ready to-night, as I am dining at the Savoy and dancing after."

"I can't help that. The pudding has to go on early to-morrow, so I must have the stuff to-night."

"Telephone."

"That means giving those people upstairs two pence. I can't afford even two pence on a call, so you'd better do it. It won't take you long."

"Why not send Min."

"I am not going to ask a favour of Min. She's been very rude, and I had to slap her."

"Well, then, send the char."

"How can you suggest it! She's hard at work in the bedrooms and seeing that she comes only twice a week, she's got to carry on with it to be done at six. Don't be selfish."

"I like that!" Marigold removed the pins to assert herself. "I've got to finish this, and there's heaps yet to be done. You are very inconsiderate to want things all your own way, no matter how it puts others out."

"Who is inconsiderate, I should like to know, when I am working my fingers to the bone keeping house, while you are gallivanting and enjoying yourself all the time. Where did you get that flower from?" catching sight of a deep, red silk rose in the folds of the georgette at the junction of the shoulder-strap. She had refused to pay for the flower, and Marigold had acquired it all the same.

"It's no business of yours."

"Have you got it on credit?"

"I haven't. It's paid for."

"Who paid for it?" sternly.

"Margot, if you must know. She saw the need of a flower and gave me the money."

"Margot had no right to give you ten shillings for anything so utterly futile when money is scarce——"

"Nine and eleven pence ha'penny, to be accurate," murmured Marigold defiantly.

"And you had no right to take it, knowing, as you do, that Margot will probably do without proper lunches in town to make up for the loss of that money."

"Margot knows her own business best and shouldn't be so generous if it means starving herself. She simply said the frock required it, and I could have the flower."

"I wonder you have so little pride——"

"Pride? What am I to be proud about? Our little home? Old clothes that I have to convert into new? When I haven't an allowance of my own and have to ask you for sixpence if I want it, how can I nurse pride? I have made up my mind that only those who have heaps of money may be stuck up. I'll be very proud, indeed, when I marry a rich man and have a banking account."

"If you can sell yourself to the highest bidder, you have no sort of morality or pride left. Who are you going out with to-night? Rolly, or Monkey Brand?"

"You may ask! Meantime, what's smelling so bad?"

"Rolly isn't in a position to marry, so it's probably the man from Texas—a true descendant of Apes. It makes one believe in the Darwin theory to look at him. How you can contemplate looking at him for the rest of your life, beats me. To have a face like that sharing one's room——"

"I did not say I would marry him."

"He expects you to."

"That doesn't bind me. He gives me a good time and I would be a fool to snub him."

"You'll be a cheat to encourage him when you mean nothing."

"What is it to you?"

"It is everything to me. Since I have to keep the roof over your head, I'll take the privilege of speaking my mind when you deserve to hear the truth. Of all the vain, shallow, empty-headed flirts in existence, you are the worst."

"You go for me because you are jealous. You can't get over Rolly preferring me to you! And you blame me. As if I wanted him!—great, blundering idiot, can't dance without treading on one's toes——"

"How dare you say I am jealous!"

"You are! You are!"

"I am not, and never was. When Rolly showed he could change, I despised him—he isn't worth shedding a tear for!"

"Yet you shed many! I know you did!"

"It's a lie!" Their voices grew louder and louder till neither could hear the ring at the front door, or Mrs. Grabbitt's elephantine tread down the hall-passage.

"Oh, go to blazes! For heaven-sake shut that kitchen door, the smell is poisonous. Anyone would think we had committed murder and were boiling the remains!"

Just then both heard a man's voice speaking.

## CHAPTER IV

### ENTER APOLLO

THE sisters stared at each other. Marigold's hand flew to her hair, Megan's face registered panic. The same thought crossed the minds of both: could they have been heard quarrelling?

Seeing that she was in no fit state to receive a visitor Megan fled to the door leading to an inner room which she shared with Margot, and asked in a whisper from the threshold:

"Are you expecting anyone?"

"No, not a soul!—what a mess!" came in jerks. Instantly she was on hands and knees picking up scraps. The frock was dislodged from the electrolier in a second, and thrown on the couch, a vanity-bag was produced in the twinkling of an eye, and the neglect of hours repaired in breathless moments before the mirror over the mantelpiece. She

was glad that the flat furnished mirrors over all the mantel-pieces as they were handy in times of emergency. Not that anything was needed to improve the flawless complexion or accentuate the beauty which was strikingly evident. But the habit of "touching up" was not prompted by necessity, and Marigold felt fortified to receive the man with the strange voice which she had heard asking for "Mrs. Cowen". He was undoubtedly a stranger, for all her "boys" never asked for her mother, being well aware that she was not to be seen.

When Peter was shown into the room, its homeliness entirely met with his approval, for it was a lived-in room and was full of individuality as belonging to girls. Who but girls would have lent it such an air of femininity? And the girl who came forward to make his acquaintance was undoubtedly Marigold, for no one else could have been so pretty. He had a queer sense of unsteadiness for a moment as if so much loveliness had gone to his head, and for the rest of his visit, he was distinctly under the spell of it.

At the moment, however, he was greatly charmed by her friendliness

"Of course, you are Kit Nicholl's brother from Malaya. How nice of you to call!" Her face was wreathed in engaging smiles, her eyes met his full of eager delight. "Do sit down and please excuse the mess. I am dress-making." She was at once childlike and ingenuous.

Peter, who was rapidly recovering his poise, said he loved a room just like this, for it meant so much more than one that was "just so". He was ready to admire everything, and said so as he admired the frock lying on the couch.

"Kit did not say you were married!" Marigold ventured.

"I am not," he was quick to retort.

"Then, how can you be a judge of frocks?"

"I can always tell what looks good, and this is absolutely it."

"You are an artist! I am glad you like my frock. Will you be annoyed with me if I work at it while talking to you? I have to, as it must be ready this evening."

"You shall certainly work. Can't I help?"

"Why not?" She laughed at him delightfully, and danced over to the couch, returning with the ball-dress which she restored to the electrolier. "You must tell me if I have pinned the flower where it should go."

"Would you trust my judgment?"

"Of course, if you are an artist."

They stood together so close that Peter inhaled the perfume from her waved hair, while the action of his heart suffered from propinquity. He told himself that it was to be expected. A normal reaction. Not being prepared for such an unconventional reception, he was naturally intrigued.

Knowing nothing whatever about women's dress or the decorative effect of flowers on an evening gown, his decision was obviously wrong, but Marigold tactfully permitted the rose to occupy the new position, and said he was truly wonderful to have such perfect taste. Peter, however, was not deceived, and laughingly praised her good manners, after which they felt like old friends. The rose was then moved around till there was no further questioning its right to remain. (What a kid she was! And how could Kit abuse her so?)

She was going out that evening, and her eyes danced while talking of it, just like a child in anticipation of a promised treat.

"A dance?"

She nodded. "I *love* dancing. Don't you?"

"I used to, years ago, but since then I've been amusing myself in other ways."

"I know!" her eyes sparkling. "You are a great sportsman. Kit said that you shoot tigers and things!"

He laughed. (What pretty teeth she had!)

"Oh!" cried Marigold. "How brave you are! I love a man to be brave." Her soft eyes widened in open admiration of his courage. "It must be terribly dangerous."

"Horribly," said he encouragingly.

She shivered. "If—if I—loved anyone a great deal, I should not know a moment's peace if he went into danger."

"Yet you like men brave?"

"Yes. I'd adore him for wanting to face dangers, but"—she shivered again and shook her head—"I—I would never be able to—to spare him. Of course I'm silly. They all say I'm the world's worst coward, but I can't help it, can I?"

"Any man would forgive that kind of cowardice." (She was very sweet!)

"That's *dear* of you"—threading a needle and tacking a flounce. "By any chance do you—do you"—looking apologetically at him—"smell something horrid?"

"I did notice something when I came in, but I don't now"—he was nothing if not brutally truthful.

"It was dishcloths boiling—Megan is on the economy tack, and once started never knows where to draw the line. We are all being poisoned to save sixpence. No sense of proportion. But Megan is housekeeper, and what she says goes. Fortunately, she closed the door when you arrived and I opened the window."

"Was that what you were quarrelling about?"

"Did you hear us? Poor me! I was getting it hot for being a selfish cat, working when I should have been buying a pound of lard or something equally uninspiring. But when you know that I have an engagement and can't very well keep it unless my one and only frock is ready, I am to be excused. Don't you agree?"

"Heartily. I think you are very clever to make your own frocks. That is economy, indeed."

"Perhaps I should tell Mummy you are here? I heard you asking for her. But she is in bed, poor dear—her nerves are pathetic."

"Don't disturb her on any account."

"Of course, Megan is cook-housekeeper, and isn't presentable till tea. But my little sister, Baby, must be about. She'll pop in presently when she knows a man is calling. Min—that's Baby—can't resist men. It's her age—all sentiment and romance! I try to teach her wisdom"—she laughed delightfully—"but I am not credited with having any." It was indescribable, the dramatic gesture and demand for his sympathy!

"How cruelly they treat you!" he teased.

"That's to be expected," she sighed, lips twitching, lashes provokingly lowered. "I'm the black sheep of the family, you must know. I never do anything right. It's natural depravity. I love everything that is forbidden fruit—pretty clothes, parties, dancing, the society of men—is that very terrible?"

"It is very normal and healthy at your age. Why not? Who says 'forbidden fruit'?"

"You see," said she confidentially, speaking with pins in her mouth, "times are changed for us. Once upon a time we had pretty clothes, we went to parties and danced, and all was gay and bright. Nowadays, you know why, these things are out of bounds, so to speak. We can't afford them and have to resign ourselves to the deprivation. But Marigold isn't allowed to sit at home despairing. She gets invitations which it isn't in human nature to refuse. She makes her own clothes and enjoys herself. It looks dreadfully selfish of her. What do you think?"

"How would your staying at home benefit the others?"

"Not at all." Plaintively.

"Please remove those pins, as I am in terror of your swallowing them!" As she obeyed instantly, he was more than ever enchanted. "I think you are very clever to turn out such pretty frocks and deserve to show them off. When will you show them off in my company?"

"You mean this one? The others are all getting out of date. Are you sure you want my company?"

"Need I have asked you?"

"You might have imagined I was hinting."

"My imagination doesn't lead me astray. Say when? I'll feel greatly honoured."

Marigold, who was kneeling on the carpet before her frock, sat back on her heels and meditated. Apparently she had many engagements and would have to sort them out. "It's awfully good of you and I'd just love you to take me somewhere. What about to-morrow night? I half promised a boy to go out with him to the talkies but—but I'd far rather be with you." A pair of cerulean-blue eyes were lifted dazzlingly to Peter's, a full, sweet mouth, smilingly parted, revealed beautiful teeth, and his pulses



quicken. He was just a little dismayed at his surrender, for he had actually done just what Kit had foretold. His weakness for beauty had swept him off his feet and caused him to act too precipitately. He had been warned, and was disregarding all warnings. What had Kit told him?

But women were unjust to each other. Kit had no opinion of Marigold because she was Megan's friend. Megan was probably jealous—step-sisters generally were, of the one that took all the wind out of their sails. Poor little Marigold! An ingenuous, light-hearted kid, full of the joy of life. He could imagine she was excellent company with her frankness and confidential way. He wondered how anyone could resist her friendliness, and was glad to think that she had openly confessed her wish to cultivate his society. "Splendid!" he replied to her flattery. "Where would you like to go? Dinner and a show?"

"Won't that cost a lot of money?" in awed accents. "I don't want you to have to spend money if you take me out anywhere. I know"—sinking her voice intimately—"that you are home for a holiday, and travelling costs such a lot!—also, these are hard times and one must not be wasteful and extravagant. Don't let us do anything, just have a run out—that is, if you have a car?"

"I have."

"Just a run out to some inn where we can have—anything to eat, bread and cheese, or anything simple—what does it matter what one eats if one is in congenial company? I should love it if we can be somewhere to talk and make friends. Do you know," confidentially, and with an air at once childish and trusting, "I knew the minute we met that we would be friends."

"Did you?" Peter felt absurdly tongue-tied, thrilled and pleased.

Marigold nodded and resumed her work. "I always know by instinct the people I shall like."

At that moment there were footsteps in the passage outside, the door opened and Mignonette entered, ready for a walk.

Another very pretty face. Peter agreed with Kit's remark that it might yet rival Marigold's, but at present the schoolgirl plumpness made Min's resemble dairy-maid beauty, to which Peter was not partial. The slim, frail daintiness of Marigold he thought adorable.

In the meantime Min showed that she was untroubled by schoolgirl shyness. He could see that she was modelling her manners on her sister's—that she aspired to be her understudy, and he was amused.

"Kit's brother! Oh, how delightful! I have always admired your photograph in Kit's sitting-room. But—come to think of it—I don't think it does him justice. Does it, Marigold?"

"Don't make him conceited, he's so nice as he is."

"You both have done one thing for me—made it impossible for me to feel a stranger. I might almost have known you for years." Thus, the embarrassed Peter.

"I couldn't look upon him as a stranger," said Min, talking to the room. "If I call you 'Peter', you'll have to excuse me, for Kit never spoke of you as anything else."

"I should like it immensely, if you would all call me by my name. In Malaya, I am nothing but 'Peter'."

"Isn't it monstrous that I have to go to the Library to change Mummy's books when we have such an exciting caller as a Man from Malaya? It's inhuman, for you and he will chum up and I shall be left out in the cold. Peter, be warned! Marigold has to be labelled 'dangerous'. You are not to take all she says for Gospel. Wait till I get a word in and put you wise."

"She talks a lot of nonsense, Peter," said Marigold. "A forward little minx. I'm ashamed to own her."

"How can I tear myself away!" cried Min, hugging her parcel of books and looking roguishly over them at Peter.

"Please don't," said he, wishing she would take herself off and leave him again with Marigold. "Where's the hurry?"

"It's quite close and wouldn't be anything by car. But on foot, I'll be gone the best part of an hour!" piteously.

"Don't hint so openly," said her sister. "Peter isn't

going to offer to taxi you there and back as he much prefers to talk to me."

"Do take me, Peter. It won't take long, and we'll return immediately, for Megan is so afraid I'll be loitering in the streets looking in at shop windows. You don't mind, do you? Marigold would far rather be left to get on with her frock in which she hopes to captivate her millionaire."

Marigold swept a look of pathetic protest at Peter, designed to be reassuring, and stood away to admire the effect of her tacking. The frock hung from the electrolier as a challenge to criticism. "My millionaire, as you are pleased to call him, isn't taking me out to-night. And you might as well know that I wouldn't marry the richest man in Christendom unless I loved him."

"Ho, ho!" laughed Min, mockingly. "Chalk that down, Peter."

"Am I to take you to the library?" Peter asked, strangely stirred by Marigold's speech. The girl was magnetic. What was there about her that made it impossible for him to doubt her sincerity in spite of Kit's warning?

Min clapped her hands and pirouetted like a dancer. "How sweet of you! Thanks ever so much. Have tea ready for us when we return, Marigold, and mind you put some tulle into the back of that gown—it is positively draughty. Megan says it's indecent."

She led the way out and was followed by Peter, who made some futile remark concerning a quick return, and they were soon driving to the library in Kensington.

Min's tongue was not silent a minute and babbled often indiscreetly, like an overgrown *enfant terrible*, of family secrets that made Peter feel an eavesdropper. She was high-spirited and impulsive, he discovered, and easily led away by excitement. The fact of having made him take her to the library, in spite of Marigold, encouraged her to believe that she had only to be daring to succeed, so she took every opportunity that was hers to impress him favourably. Not being distinguished for loyalty, she did the best she could for herself. Peter was astonished, and had to remind himself that this was the baby of the

family, the flapper. Sparkling and conversational, she mistook candour for wit, and in that half-hour told him more of the sisters than he could have known in months of conventional acquaintance.

"Megan runs our show as if to the manner born," she rattled on, "and tries to boss us all, but we don't let her. Marigold and she never can hit it off. Fortunately, we don't see too much of Margot, as she works and is away early. Sometimes she's doing overtime and comes in late. So she doesn't count. But Megan does, and she's just a typical old maid. After Marigold cut her out with Rolly Sherwell!"

"How do you mean 'cut her out'?" He hated asking, but in fairness to the absent Marigold, he could not let the statement pass.

"Oh, Marigold gives no other girl a chance, she ropes in all the men. That's her way. She's greedy, and the men play up to her. After she cut Megan out, Megan's temper has been insufferable. Even Mummy is afraid of provoking it. Poor Mums had the shock of her life when we suddenly lost all our money, and she never feels well, so that she has to stay in bed most of the time, yet Megan grudges her service and makes out she could, if she chose, make an effort and go about. Ours is anything but a peaceful life, believe me. When Margot sides with Megan, the rest of us haven't a chance. But on the whole Margot is more generous, and has the sense to see that Marigold and I have a rotten time depending on step-sisters for every penny, so she often stretches a point for us, but Megan never. She hates us, I know, and only keeps on because there is no help for it. She can't turn us into the street, Mummy too. But she never realises what a thin time I am having—never going anywhere, never seeing anything except a picture or two when I can pop something and raise the money."

"Surely you don't ever have to pawn things?"

"Don't I just! And so does Marigold, or how do you think we should ever have any fun. Marigold can't take money from friends—that would be unthinkable—for men don't give things for nothing, do they?" Peter winced.

"So when she wants money dreadfully, and when I wish to treat a girl-friend to the Pictures, I visit a jeweller's in the Grove where secondhand jewellery is bought or pawned, and I raise the money I want. But don't let on about it!" Min was very proud of herself and looked disappointed when Peter said he thought it advisable that she gave up making money in that way. It jarred him badly to think of two such girls as Marigold and Min, pawning their jewellery for the sake of their needs and pleasures. Of course, neither Megan nor Margot knew anything about it.

He had a passing wonder, what this Margot was like, but as she was a Sheridan and not a Cowen, she would be totally unlike her younger sisters.

"Haven't you ever thought of getting a job?" he asked, when returning from the library.

"Haven't I, indeed! But Megan won't hear of it. She says that I am not to be trusted to take a job till I have more ballast! Think of it. I told her that weighing ten stone as I do, I should be considered thoroughly steady." And she laughed as at a clever joke. "She wants Marigold to get work, but I can't see Marigold earning her living—she's too lazy except when doing something to her clothes to make them presentable. I am so glad you came to call, Peter. Kit says you are wonderful! I feel that I can say anything to you as to an old friend." And Min startled him by rubbing her soft cheek against his sleeve. "I'm going to like you awfully much, and I do hope you'll like me. Say you will."

Her round, baby face against his shoulder, her blue eyes, so like Marigold's, lifted sentimentally to his would have been amusing had he not distrusted her character and feared for her future. Apparently, Min was a precocious little sensualist, and being in the adolescent stage, might one day be a temptation to some man not so self-restrained as he, and thus be a danger to herself. However, his reply was none the less hearty:

"Of course I will. I do already, and it's ever so kind of you and Marigold to make me feel so much at home."

"Marigold would let you down, but I never would."

"You are not very kind to Marigold."

"Nobody is kind to me!" pouting. "Sometimes I feel inclined to run away, only I am afraid the police would fetch me back." Childishly.

"You must never think such thoughts," said Peter, alarmed. Did her sisters know of her rebelliousness? "You are too young to face the world alone, and for a few years must be taken care of by those to whom you belong. Then, one day, some nice fellow will ask you to marry him and you'll be glad you bore with things and were patient."

"I hope he'll be like you," she cried affectionately, tucking her hand within his elbow. "I'm so glad you brought me to the library. I have such a rotten time, I never go anywhere—never see any shows——"

"Poor kid! I'll get tickets and take you all to a show."

"Not all! I want to go with you, alone. I'd love to show you off to my girl friends."

Peter would have liked her if she had been less forward and pushing. He decided that he did not like Min half as much as Marigold, who had a great deal of charm and, though frank, was more restrained. If Mignonette was like this now, what was she going to be a few years hence? he wondered. And could she be trusted to take care of herself if sent out to earn her living? He thought not, and could imagine her in the society of men who would take every advantage of her precocity for their own amusement. Megan knew what she was about when she had said that Min was too young and wanting in ballast to be exposed to the temptations of life, unprotected. Presently, he had no doubt that the family would have their hands full keeping her in order.

On the whole, he did not take to the youngest sister, and was glad when at length they returned to Kremlin Crescent.

Marigold was still working on her gown when they entered, and Megan, who had changed into an afternoon dress, was laying out the tea.

She received Peter cordially and encouraged him to

talk of Kit and Hove. How were the kiddies? She was the godmother of Bunny and thought him a lovely child.

While they conversed, Peter gained the impression of great strength of character, capability, and fine qualities tempered by nervous irritability and a chafing spirit. Things had gone ill for Megan Sheridan. She was being sacrificed by circumstances on the altar of family and, as a true martyr, was allowing herself to be bound to the stake. She hated the turn life had taken for her, but would die doing what she thought was her duty. In her appearance she was unlike both Marigold and Min, being tall and slight, with a pale skin and tired eyes. Under happier circumstances, she might have been even good-looking. but smiles did not come readily to Megan's face, and trouble lurked in her sombre eyes. This was Megan. He had yet to meet the independent Margot, also a Sheridan, who had pooled her income with Megan's for the general good, and was supplementing it by working.

## CHAPTER V

### BAD LUCK

PETER took up his quarters at his club for the two weeks that followed, that he might be on hand to fulfil the many engagements he made with Marigold Cowen and her sisters. After driving Megan to Hove for a day and bringing her back, treating Marigold and Min to plays, at which he sat between the sisters and made mental comparisons between them to Min's disadvantage; after concentrating on improving his acquaintance with Marigold, who attracted him, physically, as no woman had hitherto done, he thought it time to flee for reflection to Hove before he allowed himself to rush headlong into indiscretion. Marigold was an artist at coquetry and knew just how far to go when captivating a man without losing her elusiveness;

thus Peter summarised. If she was the flirt Kit and Min declared, she knew how to make herself absolutely adorable, while a man could never be sure of her or presume on his advantages—at least, such was his experience of Marigold.

Min, however, would have had him believe that Marigold was too clever to make mistakes. "She knows exactly with whom she can be herself, and with whom the ideal woman. Marigold sizes a man up at first sight—she's too clever! and she buys and sells him twice over when she likes."

It grated against him to hear the younger sister defame the elder so disloyally, and Peter judged her accordingly. A very naughty little girl and thoroughly untrustworthy.

He had no fault to find with Marigold who had, in his judgment, a straightforward, delightful nature. She was wholly feminine and alluring, and consciously so, for she was a past mistress at sex-attraction, and well knew the power of her beauty. He did not blame her for natural vanity and the exercise of her witcheries, for it was the privilege of her loveliness. And she was magnetic when occasion made her intimate and familiar, for, with the familiar use of his Christian name, little intimacies of an innocent nature followed and made a deeper impression on his mind than, perhaps, he had any right to encourage. For instance:

"Oh, Peter!" in a tragic whisper as they were mounting the steps of the Empire theatre to enjoy a "Talkie", "I have done a dreadful thing."

"What is it?" pausing beside her anxiously.

"I've burst a suspender and it's bound to dangle down below my frock!"

"Take it off," said he. "I'll stand between you and the world"—something he was beginning to feel would be the crowning joy of his life.

She turned towards the wall and he towards the crowd ascending the steps, and a moment later she was pressing a tight bundle of diminutive size into his hand. The tragic earnestness of her blue-bell eyes made him long to snatch



her to him with kisses, and the ache was evident in his ardent gaze.

"Where have you put it?" she whispered confidentially as they passed into the theatre.

"Into my breast pocket."

"How dear of you! I don't know what I should have done if I had been with anyone else."

Could anything have been more innocently flattering? Peter glowed inwardly, and thrilled all the evening as, seated beside her, he dwelt self-consciously on their new intimacy and sympathetic relations. How wonderfully sweet of her to lean on him in this moment of emergency! and how alive and precious was the little parcel he had placed close to his heart. Every now and again he could not refrain like a fool from feeling it and adoring it as a token of trust and confidence.

Another time in the car, she complained of feeling desperately sick. "Oh, Peter!—it's dreadful. Suppose I have to—to—*be* sick?" Two lovely eyes pleaded with his in panic.

"Shall I take you to a chemist's?" he asked, filled with tender solicitude.

She shook her head and pressed her handkerchief to her lips.

"What has upset you—not the car?"

"I must have eaten something that has not agreed."

They had dined at a foreign restaurant, and there was reason in her diagnosis, but nothing comforting. He was all pity and concern.

"Shall I drive you home? You won't be fit to dance to-night."

"No—I'll be better in a moment—but I shan't dance. Take me somewhere—just where I can be quiet and recover. Perhaps if you will drive to a chemist's I can sit in the car while you get me something—anything——"

Peter drove swiftly to a chemist's cursing when the car was held up by a policeman's outstretched arm at a crossing, and all but colliding with vehicles round corners. At length, he pulled up in a side street at the nearest dispensary, and dashed into the shop for the necessary

treatment. Returning with a dose of sal volatile, he saw her drink it, and fussed about her like a distracted husband till she smiled and said matters were improving.

He then sat beside her rubbing her little hands in his as part of the treatment, and watching her with his heart in his eyes, feeling that there was no longer any hope for him; he had 'got it badly'. She was adorable, and Kit might say what she liked. Min might in her cattish jealousy malign her sister to her utmost, he was in a position to know best, and nothing would convince him that Marigold was anything but the dearest of girls, the sweetest of natures, the most desirable feminine thing on God's earth. Of course, he was aware that she was not for him, hence the poignancy of the situation. He had fallen in love, but it was out of the question that he should ever be led into saying: "Will you marry me?" It was a foregone conclusion that she would not, for what had he to offer a wife like Marigold?

Such thoughts gave Peter's eyes that dog-like wistfulness so unconsciously attractive and becoming as to make Megan remark to the family at breakfast that Kit's brother had a "lovable face".

Whether Marigold thought so too, does not transpire, for Min alone was her confidante and, at this time, relations were strained between them for reasons obvious to all.

A few episodes, as related, did away with many barriers so that without actually any lovemaking, Peter found he was making love to Marigold dumbly every time they met and were alone together. And Marigold behaved with him like a confiding little sister, once falling sound asleep in the car on her way home after a dance, her head resting against his shoulder. On this occasion, Peter had hired a chauffeur-driven car and was at liberty to contribute to her comfort to his heart's content. How often he stole light kisses, burying his lips in her hair, she may or may not have known, but she gave no sign and the magnetism of her unconscious abandonment to his 'brotherly' care intoxicated him and increased his adoration.

Thus it happened at the end of a fortnight's intimate

friendship with the family at the flat, during which Peter was devoted to the entertainment of Marigold more than the others, he thought it prudent to call a halt and retire to Hove so as to face the problem he had invited. It was not going to assist him to happiness to fall desperately in love with a girl he could never marry, for under no circumstances could he imagine Marigold living on a plantation in Malaya. She was not suited to the life, and the sooner he assimilated that fact, the better for him. She made no secret of her passion for dancing, her love of society and pleasure. She could no more do without entertainment than a butterfly without sunshine. It was the way she had been brought up, and it would be madness for him to think she would be happy out there even if he succeeded in winning her love, which, in his heart he felt was not impossible. How sweet she was to him, showing her pleasure in his company, gently considerate of his circumstances, anxious not to be an expense. She would insist on dress-circle seats instead of stalls, and generally insisted upon 'talkies' as they were cheapest of all. "I don't care where we go, so long as we enjoy ourselves," she would say, delighting him by her hint of appreciating his society.

He would go over and over a hypothetical situation in which he proposed marriage, saying he hardly dared to suggest carrying her away to the wilderness, as it were. And her reply that, with the man she loved, any 'wilderness would be paradise enow'.

Would she say so? He did not believe it for a moment. Malaya was to be the great obstacle to their coming together, and no use pretending otherwise.

"How quiet you are!" said Kit, as they played a round of golf together, her babies left in the care of the maid-of-all-work. It was not often that Kit left 'the girl' to mind her babies lest she should wheel the pram to some congested quarter of the town instead of by the sea, in order to meet and gossip with friends. Peter, however, needed companionship, for he was sadly bored with Hove. She might have expected it after introducing him to that exciting family at Bayswater.

"Am I? I never was a great hand at chatting."

"But you look so absent. Your eyes tell tales, Peter dear."

"What sort of tales? I have been very good since I came home. No bachelor parties or binges——"

"I know that! the tales they tell are of hankering after things out of your reach. Is it Marigold?" As he made no reply, she said tartly, "I might have guessed it would be Marigold—and after I warned you what to expect! You men are all the same."

"I think you are not fair to Marigold, Kit, old dear."

"You naturally think so. I know all about her. Her sisters ought to know her character. Megan only this last time had bitter complaints——"

"I hate sisters to run each other down. Megan is a disappointed woman. She is naturally jealous—so is Min——"

"And Margot?"

"I don't know Margot. She was never there."

"Margot also is fed up with her. They all are."

"And can't you see why? Marigold is too pretty—too attractive for the men to let her alone. Take me, for example. I couldn't look at the others after meeting her. She sweeps one off one's feet."

Kit saw that the case was already hopeless and ceased to argue. With a man like Peter, to try to disparage the girl he loved would only stiffen opposition and increase his loyalty. "I admit that it is true, for Marigold captivates all hearts by her lovely face."

"And her wonderful nature."

"Her little way, rather, which is 'irresistible to men,'" continued Kit. "I am not prepared to discuss her nature, for I could not convince you that my longer acquaintance with it gives me a superior advantage."

"You see her through Megan's jealous eyes——"

"Poor Megan! She is not jealous, though she certainly has been made bitter. However, since you are so completely bowled over by Marigold's charm, as I feared you would be, I have nothing to say. What are you going to do

about it? Don't mistake my interest in you for unworthy curiosity."

"That's all right, old thing. Frankly, I don't know what to do."

"You'll know pretty soon if you keep on seeing her. I am dreadfully afraid that you'll be asking for trouble. I am sorry I ever sent you there."

"It had to be. Fate rules our destinies, and we are merely pawns in the great game."

"I don't believe it. We are largely responsible for our own mistakes. So be warned if there is time."

"Too late," and Peter tried to smile while his eyes looked haunted.

"Why go back, Peter? Take a run to Scotland."

"Why does the moth return to the candle?"

"To singe its wings foolishly!"

"To perish, rather, in the flame."

Kit studied his pale, irresolute face, always so self-confident and assured, and deplored the falling off. Peter was no ordinary lover given to flirting with many women and riding away. He would be in deadly earnest when he honestly succumbed to the divine passion, and would believe in the loved one as he believed in God. To satisfy his high ideals she would have to be much more than beautiful in her looks. Her personality would have to be worthy of his whole-hearted worship, and it would be a catastrophe if she failed him in honour and truth. For then, not all the king's horses and all the king's men would make her continue beautiful in his sight.

"I'm worried about you, Peter. If it had been Megan—or even Margot, I would have been happier about you, but Marigold! I don't know," relenting. "She's very young and may mend. They say that the greatest flirts make the best wives—whether that is true or not!"

And Peter laughed for the first time heartily. "None of you understand Marigold, old girl. She's all right—and I think men get better opportunities of knowing girls than women."

"There you are quite wrong. Women do a lot of play-acting with men; they are born actresses, while with

women they haven't the time for camouflage. It's too much bother, and not worth while, so we get a glimpse behind the scenes."

"And what glimpse have you had personally—apart from malicious misrepresentations of a biased mind, of Marigold's character?" There was a fighting light in Peter's eye.

"If you come to that—actions speak louder than words. But don't let us quarrel over Marigold. It is entirely your affair and I will always wish you the best in life."

"Thank you," said Peter, as they continued their game.

The result of Peter's hard thinking for two days was to leave him just where he was before and determined to live only in the present, for the future was on the knees of the gods. All depended on Marigold herself. She might prove a wonderful surprise, and he yet be the most envied of men.

Hove was unutterably dull and commonplace after Kremlin Crescent and the welcome he could always count on receiving. He was getting used to the smell of food lingering in the flat, the chatter of girls' voices, the litter of sewing in the living-room, for it was all homely and eloquent of the impatience of those compelled to submit to what they regarded as a passing phase in their lives. Marigold knew she would not need to inhabit those quarters long, and Min looked forward to the day when she would, like Margot, live out of the house and only use it for bed and breakfast till she had a home of her own.

So used were the family to the absence of Margot that she was rarely mentioned except when someone had a story to tell of which she was the heroine. Gradually Peter picked up the idea that Margot was an alien in that circle, never having allowed herself to belong to it. A boyish, independent young woman who had a will of her own and asked no one to advise her. Recent exploits alluded to, were enlightening.

"Margot sticks at nothing," said Mignonette. "If I did the half of what she does, I'd never hear the end of it."

"But Margot is tremendously self-respecting," put in Megan.

"I don't call that being self-respecting, cheating the omnibus company out of fares!" cried Mrs. Cowen, patting a ribbon on her cap as she reclined among her pillows, her eyes on the mirror opposite.

Mrs. Cowen, in a *crêpe de Chine* dressing jacket and a bewitching boudoir cap, was looking like Marigold's elder sister instead of mother. She had consented to receive Peter Dunbar in her bedroom with her daughters sitting about on her bed, and was as concerned about her appearance as any girl in her teens. It was not often she had the inclination to entertain a young man in her room, but curiosity regarding Peter, of whom she had heard so much, had made her suggest an introduction.

A male edition of Kit, only better looking, was her verdict afterwards, and during his visit she did her best to excite his sympathy for her unhappy state, only the girls would persist in diverting the conversation into other channels.

"That wasn't cheating the omnibus company, Mummy. Margot meant to make it up afterwards, which she did, as you know, but she was tired and had to get home somehow, and hadn't any money on her, also her 'season' had expired, so she couldn't come by train," Megan replied.

"Why hadn't she money? What does she do with her money?"

"She doesn't save any," said Megan. "No one lets her."

"No one makes her spend it!"

"Darling," said Marigold, in her soft, cooing voice, "Margot never has a bean left by the end of the week. When she has paid her board and fares and lunches, tipped beggars and lent money to whoever asks her, she's 'broke' by Saturday. She gave me ten shillings, don't forget, as I had to get that flower for my frock. Margot's a dear."

"But it's very stupid of her not to see she has her fare home, whatever calls she may have on her purse. Has she been giving up her luncheons again?"

"I don't know what she does. All I know is that she is looking starved," said Megan "and will be getting ill and adding to our burdens, she's so ridiculous."

"Tell Peter what Margot did," said Min, bubbling over with appreciation of her step-sister's latest exploit.

"Why? he's not interested."

"I am. Do go on," said Peter, watching the lights in Marigold's hair.

"I'll tell you," said Min. "Margot found she hadn't a penny in her purse when she was coming home, someone pinched her last half-crown or she dropped it, so that she had to get here from Ludgate Circus on foot unless she had a lift. Of course, Margot wouldn't take a lift from a stranger, so she got on the first bus she saw and had got as far as the Law Courts before the conductor asked her, 'Fares please'. Margot looked innocently at him and fumbled with her purse.

"Am I right for Mansion House?" said she.

"You're in the wrong bus", growled the conductor, pulling the bell. He let Margot get down, and she took another going in the same direction and was carried to St. Mary le Strand. There she was put out with the same story that she was in the wrong bus. 'Cross to the other side, Miss, and take a bus going the opposite way', the kind conductor advised her. But Margot had her tongue in her cheek. She waited till he was out of sight and repeated the operation all the way to Oxford Circus, then got along by degrees till she reached Notting Hill Gate, then walked the little way left, having taken an hour to do the journey and having done it free!"

"Finish the story," said Megan, who defended the absent one vigorously. "Margot went from Notting Hill Gate—a distance of a hundred yards, by bus, the following Monday, and paid for a ticket to Liverpool Street so as to be more than square with the omnibus company."

"That's not half such a good story as her cheating the restaurant," said Marigold, "and just to prove how easily it's done."

"I am ashamed of Margot," said Mrs. Cowen. "Think if she had been caught, how degrading it would have been!"

"But that's just what she was so cocksure about!" said Min. "What do you think of this for cheek, Peter! Margot had an argument with one of her friends at the



## BAD LUCK

office about feeding well at a restaurant for only tuppence, and they had a bet that she would never be able to pass the doorkeeper and pay-box without being made to pay the full amount. Well, they went to feed at lunch time at a Lyons and had quite a good lunch for once in the way, for, as a rule, Margot cuts her luncheons that she might spend the money on other things. I don't know what they had—steak and kidney pudding, potatoes and greens, fruit salad and whatnot, and the bill came to the vast sum of two shillings and nine pence. When they had received their check-slips to hand in at the pay-box, Margot went upstairs to the ladies' room to tittivate, and her friend waited for her by the cake counter. When Margot returned, she sat down at another table, alone, and ordered a cup of tea. As this was in another angle of the restaurant, she was served by another waitress and got a check-slip for two pence. Margot presented two pence at the pay-box on the second slip and walked out with her friend triumphantly."

"Peter will think Margot a horrid little cheat," said Megan, "so carry on, please and say what she did next!"

"Oh, she just walked in at another door and paid the money at the pay-box on the other slip as she walked out again."

"That I consider quite a good story," said Marigold, "for it's an object lesson to restaurants to devise some stricter method of dealing with dishonest customers. I remember she sent a letter to the Daily Mirror about it, giving no names."

"Margot is always up to pranks of some sort," said Megan. "She gets quite a lot of fun out of life since she started to work. I think nature made a mistake when she made Margot a girl. She would have done well as a boy."

"I am so pleased to have met you," said Mrs. Cowen to Peter, as he rose to go. "You must come and see me again. It is very kind of you to give the children such a good time." She sighed dolefully. "This Christmas will be very different from the others we remember."

"You are very good to make me so welcome," said

Peter, loth to leave, but he had the good sense not to linger since Marigold was dining out with one of her admirers and was dancing afterwards at the Savoy. She had been very sweet, apologising to him for the engagement just as if he had the right to resent it.

"I would rather have gone somewhere with you, as you suggested, but it is rather mean to refuse these people every time they want me. They have been so kind always."

"I don't grudge you a good time, Marigold. I hope you'll enjoy yourself very much," he had replied, looking depressed. Who was the blighter? he wondered, wishing him to the antipodes.

However, Marigold made amends by seeing him to the door and her tender smile lived in his imagination as he drove through the purlieus of Bayswater to the main road. It was after six o'clock and the rain was descending in a fine drizzle, a thin fog shrouded objects, making it difficult for him to see the way clearly. Lights danced reflectingly in the windscreen and about him. What with the fog and dizzy movement of the screen-wiper, the flashing lights and road reflections, it was impossible to avoid the accident that occurred just as he swung to the left in obedience to the policeman's signal and cut in between the pavement and the road island. In defiance of the slippery roads, moving traffic and the fog, a slim girlish shape sprang at a run from the island to the pavement at the moment he turned into the main road, and only presence of mind and rapid action saved a far graver issue. The girl had fallen in the road, possibly hit by his bumper, and a crowd instantly gathered. Peter sprang out of the car and saw people lifting the unconscious form on to the curb. A policeman was immediately on the spot while someone was calling for an ambulance.

"I'll take her to the nearest hospital," said Peter. "What happened?" He was chilled with apprehension. "My God! Is she dead?"

## CHAPTER VI

## THE PATIENT

PETER was infinitely relieved to find that the girl was alive, and with the assistance of the policeman she was lifted into the car in an unconscious state, a policeman beside her, and Peter drove to the nearest hospital as directed by the constable. Here matters were taken out of his hands, and he waited in a waiting-room for news, his mind tormented by possibilities and racked with pessimism. What if she died of internal injuries? There would be a post-mortem and probably a charge against him of manslaughter? Was there ever such abominable luck? Just when he was—oh, it was unspeakable! It made him quiver from head to foot to think that he might be responsible for the death of a fellow creature. How was he to blame? He discussed the accident with a house surgeon and the policeman. Notes were taken, and time dragged on. The girl was still unconscious and no one knew who she was, there being no name or address in her purse, which contained a few toilet articles and five shillings.

His very evident anxiety was relieved, presently, by the news that no bones were broken. The case was one of concussion, and there was every reason to hope for a recovery. He could return home if he wished and call in the morning for news. As to her people, they were bound, when she did not return up to a reasonable hour, to inquire of the police, and would be directed to the hospital.

Peter saw no object in lingering at the hospital and returned to his club in a state of deep dejection. He thought of telephoning to the flat at Kremlin Crescent to say what had happened, for sympathy would have been peculiarly comforting, only the one whose sympathy he most wanted was dancing at the Savoy with some fellow who was doubtless very much in love with her. He hated

to think of her with other men, and it was brought home to him what he was to expect if he could not ask her to be his wife. Some other man would get her and nothing would ever be the same again.

It was the worst night on record for Peter, waiting for the dawn and news of the girl he had run down. Sleep was impossible; he could not eat next morning, and feared to take up the receiver to ask for news. He preferred to call instead, and drove to the hospital as soon as it was possible, to put an end to suspense.

He hardly had the patience to sit down and wait till he could be attended to. He had to pace the floor of the waiting-room in a fever of suspense. At last—oh, blessed relief, someone brought him the news that the young lady he had brought in last night was conscious and asleep. She had passed a quiet night and was doing well.

"Thank God! Was there anything he could do?"

He was advised to see the sister, and was conducted to her outside the door of the patient's room.

"We had no bed in the ward, but a room had fallen vacant into which we had to put her. Unfortunately, we have not had any news yet of, or from, her friends. It seems odd, for the police could direct them here." The sister in spotless apron and cap looked the model of efficiency and self-control.

"Spare no expense," said Peter, opening his wallet and producing a bundle of notes. "Of course, I shall meet all charges, and this is to carry on with." This, was five pounds, and the Sister was not reluctant to receive it.

"Hasn't she said anything as yet?"

"I don't think she's quite able to collect her faculties. She is a bit light-headed and wandering, so we don't encourage her to talk. After she has had a good sleep she is sure to be better."

"You don't think there is any danger?"

"I don't think so—rest and quiet will restore her, I feel confident."

"When she is better, I should like to be allowed to see her and apologise for the accident. I don't think it was my fault, but I feel none the less worried about it."

"Naturally. But I don't think there will be any need for the insurance company to get busy. She'll be all right given quiet and rest. If you call round in the afternoon, you might hear better news."

Peter retired and had a conversation with Kit on the telephone.

"I have been the cause of an accident to a girl. My car knocked her down. But she had no business to have crossed at that moment, so I don't really feel to blame, and very thankful she was not killed."

"Oh, Peter! are you sure she's not going to die? How awful!"

"It is—but they tell me she'll do all right."

He hung up the receiver after listening to comforting stories concerning people who had no ill effects from concussion. "Think of the football field!" Kit said. "How many players get knocked out with concussion and are none the worse." That was true, and Peter thought he would go round for some more sympathy to Kremlin Crescent, but remembered that Monday was Megan's washing-day and that she did not encourage visitors on Monday mornings. They had no telephone, so he could not talk to Marigold. On the whole, however, it was best for him to call when he had definitely good news to convey. Why trouble the dear girls with anxiety on his account? He dared to think that Marigold would be very much upset for his sake. She was a dear, sympathetic little soul. Had she enjoyed her dinner and dance? Did she wish he had been with her instead?

How futile it all was—his passion and folly. Trying his living best to make Marigold love him when Malaya was not the place for her! He should never suggest taking her out there, and he could hardly give up his livelihood in order to marry. To dream of selling his little rubber plantation when the market was as low as it had ever been, would be equal to financial suicide. What then was he heading for? A declaration of love that could lead nowhere? Heartache and longing? the torture of seeing Marigold married to another?

Peter tried hard to face the situation and take a sensible

view of things. Marigold was not for him. He would have to put on the brakes and not go into temptation with his eyes open. He knew that every minute spent with Marigold strengthened his feeling for her: that her friendly, intimate ways, only made it the more impossible for him to keep silent regarding his passion. Soon it would be a giant breaking bounds, and then how did he propose to chain the powerful beast? It would have to be marriage—and . . . Malaya.

Would she dare to go with him?

If she dared, ought he to take her? She did not know or understand the least of the drawbacks and might afterwards blame him—grow to hate him?

He spent the day going over and over the difficulties of his life in Malaya, seeing in imagination his bungalow devoid of the simplest comforts. Electricity had not come so far and only kerosene lamps lighted their darkness. The servants were a dirty crowd, and he could not in his wildest imagination see Marigold tackling the sort of housekeeping they were responsible for out there. Would she stand the curries? Several curries on 'curry day', composed of various condiments, and each having a different flavour—fish, meat, vegetables, egg—and a tray full of toothsome trifles for the stimulation of the lagging appetite. She would not know what to make of such dishes. Her diet would have to be a special consideration, or she would have the daily fare of goat for mutton; miserable, lean chickens bred in mouldy villages; fruit only in certain seasons.

He turned his back on the subject of food and thought of the ills of the climate, for they were plentiful. Dengue—that bone-racking fever which was a close relative of malarial rheumatism. There was always the fear of cholera and enteric. Peter could not bear to expose this lovely, delicate being to such terrors when she was totally ignorant of their prevalence. What did she know of epidemics and illnesses who had never known an illness in her life save those that children thrive upon at some stage of their growth?

Peter called at the hospital in the afternoon to find

that the patient was very much better and able to account for herself. Her relatives had been informed of her state, and one had already been to see her and arrange for her removal in the morning. Queer people! for they had not been concerned at her absence, confident that she would account for it in the morning. Would he like to——?

He certainly wished to call on her and express his regrets.

The nurse led the way to the little room on the first floor that, at one time, must have been a store closet with a window, and saw the girl leaning back among her pillows, white and listless, with dark rings round her eyes.

Something was familiar about her face, he could not quite tell what, but he was arrested by the peculiar beauty of the eyes that compelled admiration. Though she was not pretty, her eyes made it impossible for anyone to call her plain; and as they were raised to meet his, Peter remembered, and said with a smile—

"The wallet-girl, or I'm dreaming?"

"The *what?*" in puzzled surprise.

"We've met before, or I'm greatly mistaken. Don't you recall Armistice Day? You saved my wallet from being pinched, and I have rewarded you by nearly killing you. What do I deserve?"

"Oh! . . . you are from Malaya?—The world's loneliest man?"

"And you deserted me heartlessly on Charing Cross platform." Peter sat down uninvited on a neighbouring chair, threw his hat on the floor and embraced his knee, wondering the while what freak had made her tone and accent so reminiscent of Marigold Cowen.

"I have been sorry ever since," said the patient. "First because you looked so harmless, and secondly because you are from Malaya. Since then, my family having developed a lively interest in Malaya, it's as well to know something about it, geographically and economically."

"Your family, did you say?" Peter refused to accept a theory of coincidence and wanted to make sure. (This girl had a job in the City, and her family were interested in Malaya. Margot Sheridan had a job in the City and her family were learning about Malaya from him.)

"My sisters have lately made the acquaintance of a rubber planter from Malaya——"

"Is Marigold Cowen your sister?"

"Yes. Do say I resemble her, for it will be so encouraging, though I know it isn't true."

"I could have said so by your voice."

"You are very honest. Sisters get into the way of speaking alike."

"Am I forgiven for injuring you?"

"It wasn't your fault. I was careless. Then you are 'Peter Dunbar'?" A quizzical smile curved her lips, to which smiles came readily.

Though she was utterly at her ease and showed a disposition to be friendly, her manner was sufficiently dignified to hint that she was not too easy to know, which Peter had already discovered and appreciated. He expressed sympathy, asked after her injuries and learned that, beyond a headache, she was none the worse, and looked forward to returning home the next day.

They discussed the family.

"They have all taken you to their hearts," said she, "and the description of you made me wonder a little whether we—we had not already met."

"A strange coincidence." And he recalled how greatly he had been intrigued by the girl-of-the-wallet episode, in spite of the turned up nose and negligible features. He had found the laughing tilt of her lips very engaging, and had undoubtedly been struck by her glorious eyes. They were more expressive and beautiful than Marigold's, though Marigold was altogether lovely. While talking to Margot, whose individuality was impossible to ignore, his obsession for Marigold made him place the latter in a class by herself as a being to worship and idolise. He could imagine Margot a bright and pleasing companion, a jolly girl, a real pal; but Marigold was adorable, with more than her share of sex-allure, and the power to make heaven and hell for a lover.

"I have been listening to yarns about you," said he, to tease. Having been relieved of all need for anxiety and suspense, he was full of high spirits and thankfulness,



and felt like an old friend. It was not possible to behave as a stranger with Margot now that he knew she was one of the family with whom he was familiar. "Have you had any more free rides by bus of late?"

Margot coloured. "So they have been giving me away? How mean! But I never defrauded the company! In fact, I am on the right side, where they are concerned."

"How ingenious of you to devise that plan."

"It wasn't original. I heard of someone who constantly gets free lifts, and was in a bus one day when a French woman got in and paid a penny for her ride. When the conductor found her still seated a long way past the limit of that penny, he asked for another penny, but wilfully the woman kept misunderstanding him and arguing that she always paid a penny to a certain point that was, in reality, rated at three pence. Not a bit would she acknowledge defeat. She held out, saying in broken English, that she would not be imposed upon. Meantime, the bus had carried her past the tuppenny distance and was well on the way to her destination. The conductor, then finding he could not impress her, jerked the bell angrily and ordered her to get off. This she did triumphantly, for she was nearly there. The conductor, furious and scarlet, turned to the passengers and said—'Will any lady or gentleman kindly oblige me with the French for "Damn"?' It was the funniest thing!"

Peter laughed so loud that a nurse came in and suggested that he had been there quite long enough and must not excite the patient.

A sturdy little hand met his in farewell, and Peter retired, having enjoyed the half hour spent with Margot, whom he liked immensely. In his opinion, had there not been Marigold definitely the dearest and best in life, he would have been delighted to spend his holiday in the companionship of Margot. But it was too late for him to feel anything but an unemotional regard for any other girl in creation now that his heart was at Marigold's feet.

Was he a fool? Blind to the best, and the victim of witchcraft?

If so, he had no will to argue the case or to criticise his folly. Whatever Marigold was in comparison with her sisters, she had captured him for good and all, and till he knew that he had no chance of winning her love, he would remain one of her satellites or the moth that deliberately sought to perish in the golden flame.

The next time he met Margot, it was at the flat where she was forced after her accident to undergo a period of convalescence backed by a doctor's certificate, and was able to see for himself how totally unlike in temperament and disposition she was to her sisters.

Margot at home, was quiet and reserved, with little to say for herself since the younger sisters would be heard. Min's tongue was rarely silent and chattered irresponsibly of all that passed through her immature mind. Marigold contributed a breezy atmosphere to the conversation which, though not clever, was often amusing, and served to entertain. Megan's mind being tuned to more serious things, she had little to discuss but matters of household importance which, being uninteresting to the sisters, received no encouragement.

Yet, in her quiet, self-contained way, Margot managed to impress all with her individuality. Peter regarded her frequently with a keen desire to understand what it was inherent in Margot to make her stand out from the others as an unusual personality. Apparently it was her vindicated independence, a hint of pride and an air of noblesse oblige, of which nothing could deprive her—not manual labour, poverty, nor service, even when caught by a caller unexpectedly, in an overall, sweeping out a room. She was never at a loss, and had a genius for making others feel at ease with her infectious and ready laugh, the natural gaiety of her friendly nature. He also noticed a willingness to oblige, a kind tolerance for the foibles of others, and a great spirit of adventure. Min's remark that Margot "stuck at nothing", and the story of her exploits at a Lyons' restaurant was one of the sidelights he was given on her daring and initiative, which he had already proved when he first met Margot in that Armistice throng, and saw her interference to stop a thief from picking the pocket

of a stranger, who was himself. Few girls would have done more than scream, and explain what had happened when it was too late to be of use.

Something in Margot's carriage always delighted his eye—the well-shaped head held high. He thought her irregular features and wonderful eyes had an appeal all their own, and liked, especially, her little blunt nose, the tip of which had an upward tilt, making her rather fascinating in profile and suggesting an unfailing sense of humour in reserve, that was immensely stimulating.

While worshipping Marigold and placing her on a pedestal far above all other women, he could still admire Margot and enjoy her companionship at all times. He always found she fitted his moods with extraordinary understanding, and cheered his depression. A sympathetic nature, and one that would make a fine pal to a man, for she was a "real sport". High praise from a man.

An optimist, was Margot. And the humour with which she related her experiences in the City never failed to amuse; but she sometimes showed a serious and thoughtful side to her nature, and could be mute and self-absorbed while the others chattered or squabbled, her thoughts anywhere but with the company, and Peter wondered if a great deal of her effervescence was a refuge from futile repining.

It became a habit for the family to foregather in Mrs. Cowen's bedroom for afternoon tea, Peter being given an easy chair, and the girls sitting wherever most convenient on the bed and bedside. During the days of Margot's enforced abstention from work, these gatherings, always intimate and informal, made him feel that he was regarded as one of the family, for they sparred in his presence, found fault with each other, and openly discussed one another's concerns. On one of these occasions, Margot was scolded for promiscuous charity when she could neither afford to be charitable, or cut down her luncheons.

"I always said you have no money-sense," Megan remarked in summing up.

"She'll never save money for her summer holidays,"

said Min, "and she is getting as thin as a rake. Everyone takes advantage of her."

"Not forgetting yourself," said Margot.

"I refer to the hospital. You needn't have given them all that money. You could have got yourself a new frock for that amount."

"What are you talking about? I never gave them any money."

Peter felt himself flushing.

"Well, ask Megan! She said that she had got a letter from the Sister saying how a receipt for the money would be forwarded, and that they were frightfully pleased and the rest of it."

Margot looked at Megan in blank surprise.

"Why pretend? You know you gave them five pounds though I don't know how you raised such a sum!"

"Wait a bit," said Margot, in mystification. "Who in the world told you I gave the hospital five pounds?"

Peter tried to divert the conversation in vain while the blood mounted to his temples. (Confound the Sister for having given him away!)

"The Sister said that 'the five pounds paid for the room' would be officially acknowledged, and that they were very grateful for the 'donation'."

Margot coloured more vividly than Peter as their eyes met.

"Did you pay that, Peter?" she asked, in shocked tones.

"I felt responsible—I could scarcely do less under the circumstances."

"But—how dare you lay me under such an obligation?" Margot challenged him with widening eyes.

"Please forgive me! In my place you would have done the same."

"You thought I was a poor, hard-working girl, and would have to be helped through?"

"Don't! I did not mean to be intrusive. I am sorry if you are annoyed."

"Don't be a pig, Margot," said Marigold, with a melting glance at Peter. "He wanted to be a sport—Peter's a

dear." Peter's gratitude overflowed from his heart into his eyes, and Margot's danced mischievously.

"As if I didn't know that! I forgive you Peter. But see how you've burdened me with debt!"

Peter protested vehemently; nevertheless, it was hopeless.

Margot had a resolute mouth in spite of its laughter-loving tilt, and it could be made to look quite uncompromising.

"I shall have to pay it back by instalments. Buy back my self-respect on the hire-purchase system," she concluded, as she dropped off her perch and slipped out of the room.

"Well, I never!" cried Mrs. Cowen. "That was very kind of you, Mr. Dunbar."

"He's Peter, Mummy," cried Min. "Don't turn him into a stranger."

"I said it was the least I could do."

"It was frightfully generous—to the hospital!" Marigold laughed.

"And you can't afford to be generous," said Megan. "Kit said long ago that you were having a rotten time with rubber selling so badly."

"That's all right. Kit knows nothing of my affairs. Please persuade Margot to let me wipe out that business. She would never have been in hospital but for me, and it is only fair——"

"No use talking to Margot," put in Marigold.

"She hasn't any money-sense, I told you, and in order to pay back the five pounds you paid on her account, she'll be living on cheese and bread for the next two months and have nothing to spend at Christmas."

"That makes me miserable."

"You were mean to tell him that, Megan!" Marigold was up again in his defence, and Peter was more than ever worshipful. How sweet she was to think of his feelings and take his part.

"Don't worry," said Megan. "It will serve Margot right. I always said she'd be doing something stupid and will bring herself to grief. Now it's justified by her

running under your car. She will learn in future to go warily when crossing a street."

After that, the subject was dropped, and Peter hoped Margot would forget all about it.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE WILLING HORSE

MARGOT did not consider Peter any more responsible for her accident than those who had rendered her first aid, and being of an impatient disposition, she could not endure the thought of being in his debt till she had earned the money to liquidate it. She therefore consulted Marigold at bedtime respecting the address of the pawnbroker to whom she was in the habit of secretly selling or pawning her unwanted trinkets, though aware that Megan would be horrified if she knew. It was such a disreputable thing to do.

"Who said I pawn jewellery?" asked Marigold indignantly. "What makes you think it?" At the same time she was unable to look her sister in the face.

"Of course you do. Stop hedging and tell me where to find him!"

"I like you bluffing like that! I have sometimes sold a few things, but I never pawn. It's beastly."

"Whatever it is, tell me the address, for I, too, have a few things to sell. What a mercy we have a little jewellery, or one would be badly hipped sometimes."

"I suppose Min has been talking?"

"Never mind Min. I must repay Peter. It is inconceivable that I should be indebted to him."

"You are very stupid to force that money on him. He'd much rather you didn't. However, please yourself. I dare say he'll be glad to have a few pounds to throw about now he's treating us to shows."

As Marigold was the one who profited most by Peter's

generosity she ceased to put obstacles in the way of Margot's visit to the pawnbroker, and the latter was able to slip out after breakfast, the next morning, and dispose of an antique brooch or two belonging to a legacy from her paternal grandmother. It had taken her some time to decide which of her ponderous antique brooches she would offer for sale, till at length she determined to sacrifice one of small brilliants encircling plaited hair. Long ago she had been told that it should be worth ten pounds, but the pawnbroker suggested five, and after much haggling bought it for six pounds, glad to stretch a point, said he, for so charming a young lady.

Margot came away thankful to have the means of settling her obligation to Peter, for obligations of any sort had to be punctiliously discharged, or they hung like a millstone round her neck.

She had spent many a wakeful night of late with Peter on her brain, seeing his face in her dreams and thinking of him while awake—of all he had said to her on Armistice Day, and all she had said to him. She knew it, word for word, having thought of little since, for he had attracted her strongly. She could not forgive herself for having run away from him for no reason but a conventional distaste for acquaintanceships made in unorthodox fashion. Only servant girls 'picked up' men to 'walk out' with, and her soul was revolted at the thought of how he would regard her easy complaisance. Yet, all the while, had she but known his name, he was Kit's brother, and now he was firmly dug in at her home and annexed by Marigold, which was to be expected. No men ever could resist Marigold, and Peter, of all men, seemed easy prey because of his faith in women. He was, with all his manliness, such a simple, ingenuous fellow. A man any girl might be forgiven for adoring.

He was too good for Marigold.

However, it was too late for her to think about him now. She had had her chance and missed it, for Margot felt that, under different circumstances, without Marigold to stand in her light, she could have won Peter Dunbar with comparative ease. Instinctively, she sensed that to

such a man, beauty alone was not enough to hold his admiration and devotion. It was the primary attraction, but what of afterwards? Had Peter never met Marigold and been hypnotised by her pretty face and little tricks of sex-attraction, he would have been perfectly happy with Margot Sheridan, who knew she would never have disappointed him.

What such a man wanted was truth and honour, sympathy and kindness, from the girl he loved—also understanding. And these things she would have given him till he grew to think her plainness beautiful. Yet—what was plainness? What was beauty?

Margot did not think herself plain, for it had been demonstrated to her frequently that vivacity, a perfectly proportioned figure, good teeth and speaking eyes could pass for beauty in spite of an indeterminate nose and a pale skin. Apart from competition with her step-sister, her personality attracted men to pay her unwelcome attentions. Perhaps they would not have looked at her had Marigold been by, but she, too, could charm, if she pleased, in quite a different way; and she had foolishly lost the chance of charming Peter.

No use thinking of him now, she told herself. Marigold had his heart in the hollow of her hand, and what she meant to do with it was nobody's business. He was content, apparently, and Margot suffered a heartache to think of how little Marigold realised her immense good fortune. If it could do any good, she would talk to Marigold seriously—try to make her understand the quality of the happiness that might be hers if she only studied Peter more than she studied herself. But as yet, Peter had not spoken, so it was premature to say anything.

She ran home from the pawnbrokers with a thumping head, and was scolded by Megan for having dared to go out so soon after her accident and while on sick leave. How easily she might have fainted in the middle of the traffic and been killed outright, this time.

The family were discussing Christmas and there was the usual discord evident and some wrangling. Min wanted money for Christmas cards and said that nothing less



than half a crown would satisfy her needs. Marigold wanted a new evening cloak, as her fur coat was giving way and would soon be past repairing.

"Besides, it is the wrong cut for this season and I feel a figure of fun in it."

"I haven't had a new coat for two years," said Megan.

"You don't need one. It is different with me. I go out so much that I wear out my things, and as I go to smart places, I can't be allowed to look shabby."

"Then don't go to smart places."

"How you talk! As if I can help it when I am taken? If you had the chance you would go too."

"Marigold always gets the best of everything!" whined Min. "She was born under a lucky star. My old fur will have to see me through the winter whatever the fashion."

"I should think so, indeed."

"Margot never wears hers. Why can't she give it to me?"

"Why should I?" said Margot. "When I can afford it I'll have it remodelled up to date. At present I'd be out of place in a fur coat when all the girls at the office wear cloth."

"I saw a perfectly delightful opera cloak at Madam Panton's in Shaftesbury Avenue. She's a Jewess and will, I am sure, reduce the price if one holds out."

"Mummy has a gorgeous satin evening cloak she will never wear and which will soon be out of fashion," said Margot. "Why not ask her to let you have it?" and Marigold shrieked in dismay.

"You don't know what you are talking about," tearfully. "A perfectly awful thing. I wouldn't be seen dead in it! and the colour! How could you have such taste as to expect me to wear silver-grey as if I were forty!"

"It's lovely," said Margot, "and I have my eye on it for myself."

"You are welcome to it," cried Marigold, crossly. "Why can't I get that cloak, Megan. They will let me have it on a deposit, and you can pay the rest in instalments."

"I absolutely refuse," stormed Megan. "I have far too

much use for money to pay this quarter's bills, and can't dream on frittering away sums on your back. You are terribly well dressed as it is, and heaven knows how you manage it!"

Marigold burst into tears and rushed from the room, followed soon afterwards by Margot, who had an understanding of her point of view. She took her seat on the bed while Marigold wept face-downwards on her pillow and tried to imagine how Peter would have felt to see his adored one weeping and miserable. She was thrilled at the thought of Marigold comforted by Peter and given the moon if she wanted it. Peter of all men!

"Look here, Marigold. Stop howling and tell me about that cloak. What is it like?"

Marigold was so taken aback at being sympathised with, that she was only too glad to comply.

"Megan is mean! mean! She knows I want to look my best when I am out with Peter. He takes such a pride in my things and—and—my fur coat is getting shabby. I have worn it so much all last year and for the last three weeks, besides—besides," she sobbed, "it isn't the right cut. See the coats in the big shops and you'll know. An evening cloak——"

"But an evening cloak isn't half as warm."

"I can always wear a woolly cardigan underneath—but it is really quite warm! and the one I saw was just the thing to go with my *crêpe de Chine*, which I remodelled only yesterday. It has all the soft shades——"

"What is the price, did you say?"

"She asked ten guineas, but being a Jew shop, I'll beat her down to five and a half. I *know* I can." Marigold looked as if the world depended on the acquisition of that opera cloak, and the earnestness of her blue eyes drowned in tears melted Margot's heart because of Peter, through whose eyes she was considering the situation.

"You talked about instalments? What will she take for a deposit?"

"Anything—I'd arrange that and pay something every week if only Megan would guarantee it. I haven't a penny of my own—it is abominable to be such a beggar."

"You wouldn't be a beggar if you got a job and earned something—even if it was only enough to dress yourself."

"I—I couldn't. I am not qualified."

"You would be qualified to work under a dressmaker."

"I've had no training and I work in my own way. No dressmaker would accept my work—besides, you know, Margot, how bad it is for me to be shut up all day. I have to get air. When I was small, the doctor said I hadn't any reserve. The least thing would give me lung trouble."

"That was after 'flu. You're as strong as a horse now."

"I have no vocation—none whatever. If you all force me to do what is like being a square peg in a round hole, I'll die—or marry the first man who asks me, even if I hate him."

"How can you say such a thing! No girl with pride would marry a man for what she can get out of him. Besides"—she hesitated. "What about Peter?"

"What about him?" hiding her face in the pillow.

"I suppose he's in love. They all are."

Silence.

"Has he said anything?"

"No. But—but——" Marigold's voice faltered and died in her throat.

"But you expect he will? He's splendid, Marigold. You'll be jolly lucky to have a man like Peter as your husband even if he's as poor as a——"

"He isn't poor. He owns an estate in Malaya which is bound to give him something even if he sold it. He ought to sell it and go into business here."

"Do you love him, Marigold?" Something in the tones of Margot's voice robbed the question of impertinence and drew an honest reply.

"I'm just crazy about Peter. I have never known anyone I could be so mad about. He's the dearest thing ever, and I'll marry him if he asks me. Only I'm so afraid he won't. He so funny about saying things. In his place—oh, well, he's just afraid—looks as if he longs to speak and—and—do things, but doesn't!"

Margot quite understood what 'do things' meant, and

glowed at the very thought of Marigold's luck. How wonderful to be kissed by—*Peter!*

"If he's terribly in love with you, Marigold, you must be very good to him and not try to make him jealous as you do the others. You know how you have upset boys and spoilt their days for them by your treatment of them for every newcomer, and——"

"It's different when one doesn't care. I never cared for anyone as I do Peter."

"That being so, I hope you will settle down and marry him if he asks you, and be very good to him. I seem to feel that a man like Peter will take things hard. He'd do things in a big way—love you more than life and suffer hell if you disappoint him. For pity-sake try not to disappoint him."

Marigold's tearful eyes looked a little scared. "I don't want to disappoint him, really. But if he insists on putting me on a pedestal——"

"Stay there, and try to be the perfect wife with all your heart and soul. I say—about that opera cloak—I have to return Peter five pounds. They said it was five pounds that he gave the hospital, so I've got the money for him here and now, and a pound over, which you can have for that deposit. Get the cloak if you must, and say you'll pay ten shillings a week till you have made up the five pound fifteen and six, which you said it will cost."

"It won't be more, but how sweet of you, Margot! You're a brick, and so generous," flinging her arms round Margot's neck and kissing her warmly.

"Oh, don't fuss," said Margot, who hated to be thanked. "I want you to look nice for Peter. But if ever you are nasty to him or let him down in any way, I'll have no mercy on you. If you knew your luck, you'd go down on your knees and thank God for him. Now—take the money. And you might as well give Peter this five-pound note from me with my very grateful thanks and say I'm happy to get it off my chest. He's a dear to have paid for me, but he should have asked permission first, and then—but we can't tell him that."

"What?"

"Oh, only that I shouldn't have had to sell my brooch, for I was there a very short time. They would have been glad of a pound."

"Of course, one can't tell him that."

"It would be in horrible taste. Let him think that I managed this, somehow—secret savings."

"It is dreadful not to have money," sighed Marigold. "How gorgeous it must be to have riches and to feel that one can buy just what takes one's fancy! There are so many people who can. You see them so exquisitely dressed in the West End, and with dreams of motor cars!"—and Marigold sighed again with longing.

"If you marry Peter you'll have to be economical, for he is anything but rich. Kit told Megan that he has to go very slow, and if he sells his rubber estate, he'll be living on capital, and that is fatal if it isn't much. You don't get jobs worth while nowadays unless you have heaps of interest, or money to finance business."

Her money was transferred to Marigold's keeping since she did not expect to see Peter, and Marigold was engaged to spend the greater part of the following day with him. In the meantime she had house-work to finish, and retired to apply herself to dust-pans and brooms, leaving her pampered little sister in a state of ecstatic enjoyment in the prospect of owning the opera cloak.

"You spoil her!" said Megan, when she confessed what she had done, knowing that sooner or later the truth would out. "Marigold gets her way at everyone's expense and thinks it her right."

"I don't know. The trouble is she's too pretty and can't help herself, so why blame her? Life is a very different proposition to her than to you and me. She's a favourite of fortune and we are not. Life is full of inequalities, so why worry. Let Marigold get on with it, and marry Peter, and may they be happy ever after."

"On the contrary—Peter's no fool. He'll wake up from his hypnotic trance of adoration and discover that his idol is made of clay."

"Not at all. Peter can't expect to marry a saint on

earth. When he finds out all Marigold's faults and failings, he'll make allowances and love her all the more. I can see it in his face."

"I, on the other hand, see a streak in Peter that is likely to upset all your calculations. He's Kit's brother, and Kit is frightfully downright and unbending in certain things. Kit couldn't put up with crookedness and lies. Once she finds a person given to such degrading lapses, she'd have no time for her. Finished!"

"I don't doubt that Peter expects truth and honour in the girl he marries, and Marigold will have to be very fond of him to live up to his standards. Where on earth do you keep the metal polish?"

"Where is Min? Why should she idle and you work, when you need to rest and lie about."

"I'm all right, but employ Min, by all means. She's probably got her nose buried in a novel she has no business to read."

"Find her and send her to me," said Megan, rolling up her sleeves and bringing the pastry-board down from a shelf. "Unless she is driven to work, she won't offer to do a handstir for anyone. Something must be done about her. She's the worry of my life."

Min was discovered as Margot predicted, and set to peeling vegetables in the sink, which she did with a bad grace; for it was hard to put down a book at the precise moment when the hero was about to enter the heroine's bedroom. It was also abominable tyranny for Margot to confiscate the book and say she would report the matter to the authorities of the library. She was bound to charge their mother with responsibility in the case, since it was for her that the books had been brought from the library; and it would be discovered that Mrs. Cowen had no knowledge of the book in question, as Min had the opportunity of choice, and was the first to open its pages. Moreover, the girl at the book-counter had given it on the understanding that it was for Mrs. Cowen's perusal. People were all so interfering and annoying. Margot was best at the office, for when she was at home she had a way of finding out things that had nothing to do with her. Marigold did

not mind, for if the book was particularly spicy, she found time to spare from her mending and dressmaking to read it in bed of a Sunday. It was all Margot or Megan—only Megan never read any books or thought of asking what the others were reading. She had too much to do.

Min disliked, of all things, to peel potatoes and wash vegetables. She would far rather have swept floors, for it did not take long to thrust the sweepings under furniture and fly around with a feather duster. Preparing vegetables meant messing about with water and getting chilblains that ruined her hands and made her ashamed to be seen without gloves. Life was altogether a miserable affair when one was seventeen and the last of four sisters. Her only excitement was going to the Pictures with her friend from upstairs, a girl a year older than herself, whose 'boy' was not free to see her till after office hours. She kept house for her old father and worked at artificial flowers of fish-scales, and made fishbone ornaments in her leisure, which she sold through friends so as to supplement her dress-allowance. To Min she was a great resource, and could be relied upon to join her on any exciting expedition concerning which it was necessary to be silent, for older people exaggerated risks and improprieties, and were prone to be censorious. They could never differentiate between a 'lark' and 'imprudence'.

Min watched the clock, for they dined early at the flat and supped at night. At two o'clock she was to meet her friend at the front door so that they might spend the afternoon together.

"You are very keen on the time," said Megan roughly. "You needn't think you're to be let off this afternoon. I want Mummy's silver cleaned, and you will have to help Marigold wash up."

"Marigold has gone out. I saw her leave just as I came to do the vegetables," snapped Min.

"Where has she gone? And why so near luncheon time?"

"She called out that she wasn't going to be in for lunch, and would have a snack at an A.B.C. in town."

"Oh, I might have known Marigold was a broken reed! I'm not feeling up to the mark and want an afternoon off."

"I've promised to go to the Pictures with Lucy. I can't clean silver to-day. Margot can do the washing-up."

"You'll do what you are told. I am not going to be the pack-horse for the family burdens that you might play about. You and Marigold! I've had enough." Megan's voice choked and her chest swelled. "I'll go on strike and let you all look after yourselves. It seems the more one does, the more one has to do. There's Mummy nursing imaginary ailments and making no effort to shake off depression. And as long as we take her meals to her room she'll lie in bed reading till she's genuinely ill and past help. I'd change my doctor, if I were she. But no, she likes being fussed over and sympathised with—oh, it's truly sickening!"

"That's a fine way to go on about Mummy!"

"I'm fed up with everybody and everything!" And Megan gave a final jab at the pastry with the ornamenting fork, and opening the over door with a jerk, pushed in the pie and slammed the door. It was to have been a pudding, but was finally made a pie since baking was the shortest process and everything seemed to have gone wrong that day. Megan sniffed and brushed away thick tears with the back of a floured hand which left a bit of dough hanging to a strand of hair, and flinging down her tools, said the family could get on with the job; she was through! With that she swept out of the room and slammed her bedroom door.

Min was so astonished that she set to work in earnest with the vegetables for, if they were to dine at all that day, she would have to make haste. For Megan to have suddenly gone off the deep end like that, argued that she must be ill. And if she felt ill, who in the world was to carry on? The kitchen had never looked so untidy with everything lying around, the pastry-board on the floor, having deposited dry flour and pieces of dough on the linoleum, things to put away, pots and pans to clean, and no suggestion of a pudding even planned. How unlike Megan!



Min put the potatoes and greens up to boil, then went in search of Margot, whom she found laboriously picking the minute evidences of Marigold's needlework off the living-room carpet.

"I think you had better see what's wrong with Megan. She's gone mad."

"What do you mean?" from Margot, suspending operations.

"She's struck, and the dinner all uncooked. But why, God knows!"

"Is she ill?"

"Find out for yourself. I've done the vegetables and put them up, but I know nothing about the pie she has put in the oven, nor the pudding which has yet to be thought of. Marigold scores, as usual, for she's out of it all—lunching and shopping."

"Marigold gone out?"

"I saw her go, and she said she'd have a 'snack' somewhere, but I know better. She can't get Peter, for he's gone down to Hove to-day; but she'll 'phone one of her boys and he'll fix up to give her lunch all right. Catch Marigold running to the expense of food in town!"

Margot concealed her surprise and annoyance in order to discover what was actually wrong with Megan, who was always a sheet-anchor in family affairs. Was she really ill, or was it a nervous breakdown? She had looked queer all the morning ever since they had all four met at breakfast in the kitchen, for she had been silent and absent-minded, short-tempered and irritable. On the charwoman's off-days their habit was to take all their meals in the little kitchen to save the labour of laying the table and carrying dishes to and fro. Megan generally considered the kitchen her domain, and her rule was supreme. What could have happened to upset her?

## CHAPTER VIII

## THE NEW IDEA

MEGAN was lying back in an easy chair which occupied a small space beside the dressing-table they two shared; the twin-beds, respectively theirs, making it difficult to move round the room without bumping into furniture. The air was damp and chilly, for bedroom fires, except in Mrs. Cowen's case, were never lighted. Out side, was typical of December, sunless and dull with a fog, intensifying as the day proceeded.

"What's the matter?" Margot saw that something was very wrong, for Megan's face was flushed, and the rims of her eyes suggested hysteria, which was totally foreign to her.

"I can't go on—I can't. It's unfair. It's abominable."

"What's happened now?"

"It's all very well for you to take that attitude when you escape all the drudgery by being away all day. I get the brunt of it all, and to think that it must go on day after day, year after year, till I am old and grey, I simply——" she swallowed and put her handkerchief to her eyes.

"How terrible!" said Margot, unsympathetically, her mouth curving upward. "What a donkey you are, Meggy! As if anything goes on day after day, and year after year. Something always happens and the scene is changed—smack! and things are quite different." She had heard that sympathy, when hysteria threatens, is a mistake and should on no account be shown.

"There is no guarantee in our case. I see nothing for it but to slog away at pots and pans" (choke), "house-work, and making ends meet for two thankless girls who might make themselves useful, but won't, unless driven to it, and no relief. No relief!"

It was awful! Margot realised exactly how Megan was feeling and felt very sorry for her. It was rough luck, thought she, but where was the remedy?

"Have patience. Marigold will be married one of these days."

"Marigold would marry to-morrow if she got a man with money. But there is no one rich enough to make her hurry up and get out. She's playing about with boys whom she can't marry, and Peter, whom she should not encourage for his own sake, poor fellow, and the only rich man on her horizon, is impossible, even to her."

"Marry gold," murmured Margot, with a grin. "She was prophetically named in infancy. What a pity Mr. Timpson of Texas is so hideous! They look like beauty and the beast together, and I'm not sure I like his manners. But what can you expect? He must have made his money in rags and bones, and never could pass for a gentleman. Yet—you'll find he'll marry well—some girl belonging to a decayed branch of the nobility, who will know how to spend his millions. How did Marigold meet him?"

"Oh, don't talk to me of Marigold!" and Megan tapped the rug under-foot impatiently. "How could she possibly have met such a man? She pretends that he was introduced to her by one of her adorers, but I shrewdly suspect she got 'picked up', or she wouldn't hedge about it to me as she does, and change the subject. I am waiting to see what happens when Peter meets him calling some afternoon—unless Marigold is smart enough to invent a way of keeping them apart. And—Rolly——" Again a choke and a welling of tears, while Margot's small face grew grave.

"What about him? He knows about Peter. They met at the Savoy, I hear."

"They did—and Marigold has dropped him altogether, for she hasn't been with him ever since Peter came. She never had any use for Rolly Sherwell, but couldn't resist flirting and adding him to her list."

"Did she say anything?"

"As if it is likely! I put two and two together. Read that!—the swine thinks he can blow hot and cold with me! 'Whistle and I'll come to ye me lad!'" And Megan

laughed angrily. "How dare he write? How dare he?" And she wept into her handkerchief.

Margot took a crumpled note from Megan's outstretched hand, and thought she could guess at the reason for Megan's upset.

*Dear Megan* (the letter was dated the previous day),

*I never see you these days. Somehow, you're always engaged when I call, and it seems a lifetime since you dined with me and went to a show. Do give me the pleasure of taking you out again, and fix an evening next week, when I shall be back in London. As perhaps you know, I have been away, off and on, for months, connected with business, and returned only last night from Berlin.*

*Yours sincerely,*

*Rolly.*

"Did you know he has been away a lot?" Margot asked, returning the letter. Megan shook her head, and replied in smothered accents:

"How was I to know? I only know that Marigold and he were doing theatres constantly. Whenever he came back he managed to communicate with her, and now, because he can't get her, he falls back on me! What does he take me for?"

"Did he ever propose to you, Megan?"

"Not—*exactly*, but—but——"

"Did he make love to you?"

"I'm not going to talk about it!"

"Then, he did. I am only piecing things together. I never could understand how you two drifted apart, unless Marigold encouraged him to be faithless."

"We saw a lot of each other when I was spending a month in Scotland, before father died." ('Father,' being Mr. Cowen, whom the Sheridans had been brought up to regard as a second parent.) "You know that on my return from Scotland we travelled together, for he's in the Stock Exchange in London. He then began taking me out a lot. Sometimes he met Marigold when he called—then I—I got to know that Marigold was meeting him in town. After

that Father died, and Rolly had to go to America for quite awhile. He wrote regularly to me and I to him, and his letters were just friendly, with a hint that he was longing to return—for my sake. When he came, we were in this flat and I was up to my eyes in work. It was house-work all the time, catering, keeping accounts, learning how to cook and manage, with only Mrs. Grabbitt to put me in the way. So, naturally, I could not accept all his invitations, and Marigold took my place. If he had really cared, she need not have taken him off, so to speak. But he has been just as infatuated as the others, and Marigold, who never cared two hoots for him, simply did it to spite me, and show how irresistible she was to men. And now, she's after Peter, and he is the biggest fool of the lot—and the most easily tricked."

"I happen to know that Marigold is very much in love with Peter, and will marry him if he proposes."

"Then God help him, is all I can say!"

"Have you answered that letter?"

"What do you take me for?" firing up instantly in her outraged pride.

"You might answer it—just to show that you are indifferent."

"I can't write to Rolly. I can't—the way I feel. It is something dreadful—dreadful—his cooling off—and then expecting me to forget all about it, and treat him as if nothing had happened."

"Write just a few lines—'Dear Rolly, I'm frightfully sorry, old man, but I haven't the time for you, and that's that'." And Margot laughed. "Buck up and don't let anyone make you miserable. Meantime, there's no dinner, and it is half-past twelve."

"Please see if the pie is all right," said Megan, "and open a tin of fruit salad. I'm going to bed, as it is time I had an afternoon off. Even a domestic servant gets that, once a week, and I haven't had a rest for months."

"Go to bed, by all means, and I'll bring your dinner to you."

"I don't want dinner. I couldn't eat." And Megan started undressing while Margot paid a visit to the kitchen

and settled the question of food. She had not learned to cook, but her intelligence and the smattering of cookery Min had picked up by watching Megan, saved the situation, and Megan had her rest.

In the meantime, Mrs. Cowen rang her bell repeatedly and was visited by Min and Margot each time to answer futile questions that might have waited, and to do little things for the invalid which she could, with an effort, have done for herself.

"What are we having for dinner?" she asked, on the occasion of her last ring of the bell. "I smell something nice and have quite an appetite, for a wonder! Don't forget to put the sauce on my tray. Megan always forgets it. Something is generally forgotten—either the salt, or my table-napkin, or a spoon for the pudding. Dear me, Megan has no head! What did you say was the dish?" When she was told, she sighed discontentedly. "Why not a pudding instead of pie! Megan cannot make puff-pastry, and I so dislike short-crust on a pie. Ellen used to give us wonderful pastry at home. Don't you remember? All in tiers, as they do at the confectioners. There is quite an art in making pastry, if one troubles to learn."

"Megan has gone to bed. She's tired and needs a rest," said Margot. "I shouldn't worry her about such trifles as pastry."

"I did not know she was ill! What's wrong?"

"She's not ill. Only off colour."

"You children talk unintelligible slang. Off colour! She isn't a horse. Well, tell her to take a glass of port wine, it will pick her up. Megan has no sense of proportion, and never knows when to stop once she begins working. All cooks find time to sit down and drink tea and read the *Daily Mirror*, or some such paper, but Megan goes from one thing to another, and yet Mrs. Grabbitt is always coming. Such an expense to pay a charwoman when there are four girls in the house!"

"I think you should get up, Mummy, and organise things a bit. It will do you heaps of good, and we'll love to see you about as before!"

"Me organise things? You are talking nonsense, unless

you want to laugh at me. When did I ever have to enter a kitchen in your step-father's time—or ever in my life? And now that my nerves are all gone to pieces, the sight of the kitchen would make me ill. I feel faint even when I walk across the room. How could you suggest my getting up? And now I look at you, I've never seen you look so bad! How do you feel?"

"Just a bit of a headache. It's nothing, and will pass."

"Go and lie down. Bed is the best place for you after that accident. Dear me, don't please get ill!"

"It certainly wouldn't do, for who would look after you and the house, with Megan worn out."

"I hope Megan isn't altogether worn out, for everything depends on her."

Margot made her escape, and for the next fifteen minutes had a hunt for everything that was wanted, as Megan had her special places for things which Min had not troubled to learn.

"Now, where is the oven-cloth?"

A wild search discovered it hanging on a hook behind the stove.

"Megan always puts things in impossible places," grumbled Min, "she's so afraid of untidiness."

"Get Mummie's tray ready."

"I'd say 'please', if I were you."

"Oh, go to blazes!" said Margot, using the favourite family abuse. "Where are the tray-cloths kept?"

"In the dining-room." She returned, holding it up to view. "Do you think Mums will eat with a cloth like that? It is marked with gravy in two spots."

"I can't help it. I'm not going to find a clean one when we are already late."

"She'll send it back."

"Not if I carry up the tray. Mummie's got to be reasonable. Hurry up and lay the tray, and don't miss out anything."

"What's Megan having?"

"Nothing. She's on hunger-strike." Margot began helping out a portion of pie when a juicy piece of crust shot into the air from under her knife and landed on the

tray, making a splash of stew-gravy like the advertisements of blue-black ink. "Oh, my 'gawd'!" cried Margot. "It *would* fall just there! Who was to know that there was an egg-cup bung in the middle of the pie-dish?"

"She puts it there to hold the pastry up," Min explained, doubled up with giggles. "Now you've done it! I'll *have* to get a clean cloth."

By the time a new tray-cloth had been extracted from the linen cupboard and everything was ready, Mrs. Cowen's bell was ringing incessantly.

"Don't worry," said the disrespectful Min. "She's probably dropped her handkerchief on the floor and wants it picked up. By the way, will you give her this letter. I've just discovered it in the pocket of my overall. It came by the first post this morning, and I meant to take it to her at once, but something put me off, and I put it into my pocket for the time being, and forgot all about it. Don't tell her, for the Lord's sake, or she'll talk about it for a week."

"I shall certainly tell her if it's important, and she asks."

"You're as mean as you can be! Shall I start my dinner? You'll be gone for ages."

"I'll be back at once."

"No you won't. Mummie will talk, *and* talk, *and* talk, and you'll have to fetch this, and that, and explain things, and I shall be starving while the pie gets cold."

"Oh, do as you like!" And Margot vanished with the tray.

Mrs. Cowen lost no time in opening the letter, as the handwriting was familiar. The pie had to remain covered while she satisfied her curiosity as to why Pauline had written to her after so long. "The last time was when she commiserated with me over the—disaster. I had such heaps of letters of condolence, but very few of my friends have bothered about me since. I never was too friendly with Pauline Legge, as her husband was Trade—had a big boot business in the City—wholesale. But they had pots of money, and Pauline had a wonderful place out in Essex. I can't imagine what she wants."



"Why not have your dinner first? The letter can wait."

"I am not too hungry. If one goes past hunger, you lose your appetite. I rang and rang to say so, but nobody would listen. Oh, dear!" running her eyes down the page. "Don't go—listen. This is very entertaining—but—she's coming to-morrow to tea with me. Let me see—it's *this afternoon*, by the date! When did this letter arrive? I should have had it by the early post."

"It was forgotten—there was so much to do."

"I can't forgive such neglect! It might have been an important matter—and so it is, for what can we give her for tea? She will have it in my room, of course. There isn't anything in the house, I'm sure."

"I don't suppose there is. She'll have to do with bread and butter."

Mrs. Cowen uttered a suppressed scream. "I should be ashamed and disgraced for ever! Min will have to run out to the Grove. Listen"—and she read aloud:

Westminster Palace Hotel,

Westminster, S.W.1.

10th December.

My dear Rosemary,

*It is so long since we met, and somehow I had lost your address, but you will forgive me when you know what a worrisome time I've had for months and months—domestic troubles are the worst troubles. And when I tell you that my daughter Lilian (she's the eldest, as you may remember, though the smallest) married an Indian Prince last week, you will understand how things have been with me. It took a long time for me to reconcile myself to her choice, but she is of age and was determined to have her way, though it has been represented to her that her children will be Eurasians. You can't do anything with girls nowadays, but at all events, she will be exceedingly rich, for the Maharajah of Jungliwallah is a multimillionaire with a territory as large as Scotland, I am told, and a dozen motor cars, a hundred elephants and what-not. Lilian is addressed as 'Maharanee', and will have Eastern maids-in-waiting. Already her jewels are a sight to see. But why waste time writing all this when*

*we can meet and talk over things, past and present. Of course Lilian's enemies, who are jealous, say dreadful things about polygamists and pagans, purdah, and such horrors, but my son-in-law, who was educated at Oxford—that is, he was there for a year, has assured me that Lilian will be very happy and a great lady in India. His religion allows him to marry more than one wife, so that his marriage is legal under the law in India. She will be supreme, and the others will be put away. The law is quite beyond understanding, for I am told one has to be very careful in these mixed marriages. And though a girl may be legally married in India, she may not be in England, which sounds absurd. However, Lilian has done it, and I am forced to accept the situation. Mrs. Bagshot gave me your address, and unless you 'phone me to the contrary, I will run round and see you. I hope I shall find you well, for I mean to take you back with me to Moreton Gadsby next week, for I am sure the change will be good for you.*

*Trusting your dear girls are well, and that I shall hear good news concerning them—particularly Marigold, who is quite the prettiest child I have known,*

*Yours affectionately,*

*Pauline Legge.*

"So that's that! She's coming and what is to be done?"

"Get through with your dinner first, and we'll see what can be done," said Margot, making an attempt to leave the room.

"Oh, don't go, child! How can you leave me in such a quandary? You girls are so unsympathetic! Just consider—the last time we saw each other, I used to be so beautifully dressed, and she always admired my taste. Now I have nothing to put on my back! My best bed-jacket is tearing under the arm because I have to stretch out for things on the table, and I noticed that there is a spot of tea on the lace frill in front."

"It won't be noticed. Don't lift your arm, and the tea-stain can be doubled under. I do think it is a brain-wave, her taking you back with her," Margot continued,

sitting down on the edge of the bed to enforce her arguments. Nothing had, so far, prevailed on Mrs. Cowen to rouse herself, shake off her seeming hypochondria and imaginary ailments, and live a normal life. Her world had collapsed, and she could visualise no other. It was time that fresh ideas were grafted into her brain, and Margot's eyes twinkled behind their earnestness as she proceeded to put forth possibilities. "You see, darling, it will be the very thing to pick you up and set you on your feet again. Mrs. Legge has a beautiful home, motor cars and servants, and she sees plenty of society. You see no one here, but some patronising friend, or faithful old servant, and Marigold's numerous sweethearts—Peter, the latest of them all. Now, why on earth shouldn't you buck up and—and marry again? You are ever so pretty and young. . . ."

"Margot!—how *dare* you!" Mrs. Cowen breathed, thoroughly embarrassed.

"Why not? You are only forty-eight, and look thirty-five. Why should you get older than you need, only through pessimism? Women of fifty-eight are playing tennis and dancing at night clubs. . . ."

"My dear, my *dear*!—how can you suggest . . ."

"I do suggest it. Think!—once you are up and about, dressed charmingly—for you can, on quite a little, for the sales are wonderful."

"But where is the money to come from?" wailed Mrs. Cowen helplessly, and with longing eyes.

"Darling! You have beautiful jewellery—sell some of it. It is iniquitous for you to hoard lovely jewels and lie in bed bemoaning your poverty. Five hundred pounds would make a new woman of you, and I'm willing to bet lots of elderly widowers and stuffy old bachelors with large investments and big bank balances, would want to marry you. You are ever so pretty when you light up and assist nature a bit."

"You talk a lot of nonsense," said Mrs. Cowen, showing in her ingenuous face that the idea had taken root.

"Think it over, and when Mrs. Legge comes, accept

her invitation. I guarantee to sell your trinkets for you—or a diamond ring or two.”

“I hate the idea of selling my beautiful jewels that are to be heirlooms for you girls.”

“We’d far rather see you a great lady again, in a home of your own, with a husband to take care of you. Then Megan can think of getting married if she gets the chance, and I can become a bachelor-girl in digs with two pals I know. It’s the ideal life.”

“Oh, go away and have your dinner. Make haste, too, for I shall want to be tidied up and helped into fresh things.”

Margot left Mrs. Cowen eating the despised pie-crust with an appetite, and eyes grown luminous with new ideas, hopes, and ambitions, and arrived in a silent kitchen stacked with unwashed dishes, Min’s plates under water in the sink, and a pencilled note on the dresser:

*So sorry I can't stop to lend a hand, as Lucy is expecting me to spend the afternoon with her at the Pictures. If you like, leave everything, just as it is, till I come home, or we can make one job of dinner and the supper wash-up. It's a beastly nuisance, and I'd far rather lick stamps in an office or answer telephones—even sell tickets in a cinema box-office than be a cook's-mate. So long! Take my advice and go to bed, too. Why should Mummie have the monopoly of bed, and Megan go on strike when you look rotten and need a rest? It's frightfully unfair.*

She had scribbled her initials at the bottom and had propped up the paper with the toast rack.

Min’s notions of equity required digesting.

Margot gazed round on the *débris* of cooking vessels to be cleaned, thought of the tray yet to be added to the list, her mother’s expectation of help so as to be presentable for her visitor, and sat down on a hard-bottomed chair.

When there is too much to do, the first impulse is to do nothing at all.

## CHAPTER IX

## CLOTHES VERSUS JEWELLERY

It was altogether an exciting day. A day of untoward happenings. How its insurmountable difficulties were overcome were forgotten in all that followed in thrilling sequence.

It was a mere trifle, a wave of a wand, as it were, to furnish a dainty tea, to come back into the kitchen after setting the scene in Mrs. Cowen's bedroom for the reception of the visitor, and then to find that every dish had been scoured, and every plate was back in the rack; for Mrs. Grabbitt had called, meanwhile, to ask for her 'day' to be changed, as she was expecting a sister from Wales, and to her professional eye and skilful hands, washing-up and tidying had no terrors. The wand which Margot had waved for the providing of Mrs. Cowen's tea for two was a neighbour's telephone and the obliging nature of the tradesman, who sent up by a delivery-boy on a bicycle all that was wanted within ten minutes of the order.

Mrs. Cowen in her *crêpe de Chine* dressing-jacket, with the tea-spots pinned out of sight, and her boudoir-cap worn at a most becoming angle, saw her reflection in the mirror opposite, and was of opinion that Margot was not far wrong when she called her mother a very pretty woman, who looked much younger than her age. Other women had married three husbands in turn, why not she? All at once, she had lost interest in her library book, and her thoughts concentrated themselves on her jewel-case, which she meant to look through the moment Pauline Legge's visit was over.

Mrs. Legge then arrived in an exquisite limousine, with a dignified chauffeur at the wheel, and was shown to her old friend's bedroom, where they fell on each other's necks, Mrs. Cowen far more cordial than she had been in the

past to the wife of the Director of "The Legge Shoe and Gaiter Company Limited".

Mrs. Legge looked stout and prosperous, carrying all before her, and found some difficulty in accommodating herself with the armchair Margot had provided for her from the living-room. She was, however, a large-hearted and friendly person, brimming over with sympathy for her friend whose circumstances were so different from what they had been last year. If she dwelt tactlessly on the change, it was with the best of intentions, and her hearty invitation to her dear Rosemary to spend a month at Moreton Gadsby made up for native vulgarity. Mrs. Cowen was asked to bring one of her daughters with her to take care of her, and Mrs. Legge was confident that the good air of Essex would soon restore her lost health.

"It will make another woman of you, my dear," said the lady, asthmatically, wheezing audibly as she expatiated on the charm of her home. "There'll be drives in the fresh air every sunny morning, and cheerful company and surroundings. You'll cease to feel an invalid after the first few days, mark me. Mr. Legge says that there's nothing like fresh air for all complaints, and the way he insists on my taking it, is positively autocratic. But health is everything. Where is the use of riches, say I, if one hasn't health?"

"It is so sweet of you, and I think a change is what I do require after all the miserable time I have had," said Mrs. Cowen plaintively. "To be so restricted for means when I never had to consider economy, is enough to bring the most optimistic spirit low. My nerves are such now, that I weep if anyone looks at me."

"We'll cure all that, dearie. Just you come and taste a bit of our Moreton Gadsby air, I say, and you'll be dancing at Marigold's wedding presently." Mrs. Legge chuckled in the depths of her fleshy cheeks, and looked knowing. "Who is the young man, now?"

Mrs. Cowen cast up her eyes as if incapable of discriminating among the multiplicity of Marigold's suitors. "Marigold is as naughty as ever, and never can make up her mind. She certainly knows how to enjoy a good time."

"And Megan? She used to go about with such a nice man—I've forgotten his name."

"Megan hasn't time for men, these days. She's so busy running the house. Not being used to housekeeping, it is naturally harder than when one is to the manner born."

"Quite, quite. But a girl is none the worse for the apprenticeship. When I was a girl I could cook a joint with the best, and my pastry was divine. It is long since I touched a cooking-pot, but I made my girls take domestic-economy lessons when they left school. Then there is Margot. Was that Margot who let me in?"

"Yes. Didn't you recognise her?"

"Hardly. She's different, somehow. So very dignified. She was a tomboy last year, if I remember. She and Lilian were playmates, and what scrapes they got into on the river at Henley!"

"She works up at the City and has settled down a lot. When the smash came, she went off and got a job through a friend, then took night-classes for typing and stenography."

"And where is Baby? What a doll she was! Some day, she'll be as pretty as Marigold. She's your youngest, so you had better bring her along to look after you if the others are busy."

Thus it was arranged before Min returned home from her unauthorised excursion, that she was to accompany her mother to Moreton Gadsby, since she could best be spared.

The treat in store for Min did not, however, prevent Margot from seeing her immediately on her return and giving her a 'piece of her mind', as she called it, for her base desertion of her post in an hour of need, and as Margot could be very stern on occasion, Min was reduced to impotent tears, with promises of future amendment. Such promises carried no weight in the family, so were treated by Margot for what they were worth, but during the scolding came a diversion in the person of Marigold carrying a bulky parcel. From the window of her bedroom where Min was being lectured on the subject of her duty, Margot

had seen a perfectly beautiful coupé draw up at the steps—the second expensive car to call at that house that afternoon—and a thick-set, heavily-built, little man hand Marigold out and lift his hat as they shook hands. Marigold had not the grace to see him drive away before she tripped up the steps and let herself into the hall with her dress-box held lovingly to her. Soon afterwards, she entered her bedroom, interrupting the scolding and the tears.

"Why, what in the world has happened?"

"We won't talk about it any more," said Margot, generously. "Let me see your cloak, for I suppose that's it. But who brought you home?"

"Oh, that was only Mr. Timpson. We met by a strange coincidence——"

"What a lie!" Min interjected sullenly. "You know you 'phoned him to give you lunch."

"I never did!" Marigold screamed indignantly. "And just mind your own business, and don't barge in on me."

"Did you lunch with him, Marigold?" Something in the steady look of Margot's speaking eyes, curiously direct and imperative, made Marigold falter and grow defiant.

"Why should I have to account to anyone for the things I do?" Then remembering her obligations, she relented and confessed that she had lunched with "Mr. Timpson-from-Texas", that day. "How could I refuse an invitation to lunch when he was so pressing?"

"Where did you meet him? Don't trouble to lie—that will only be despicable. You are perfectly at liberty to please yourself, so you may as well have the courage to face criticism, however impertinent."

"I'm not afraid except of the mountains you are likely to make out of molehills. Well—I *did* 'phone him——"

"There! I guessed as much!" from Min, under her breath, for which she had a furious glance from Marigold.

"I 'phoned him, but not to give me lunch. When I was at that shop in Shaftesbury Avenue, it began to rain and I had left my stumpy in the bus going there—by the way, I must talk to Scotland Yard about it. Well—



I remembered that Tony Timpson would be at his club at about that hour, so I took a chance on asking for a lift."

"A lift, where?"

"Home, of course. Where else?"

"But you told me when you were going out," said Min, "that you would have a snack in town. You never meant to return."

"Can't one change one's mind?" snapped Marigold, looking cornered. "Anyhow, when Mr. Timpson wanted me to lunch with him at Romano's, would I be such a fool as to say no?"

"I never imagined you would," said Margot. "It's a perfectly normal thing to do to accept an invitation to lunch with a man. But you needn't have gone to the trouble of making up a story about a coincidence. That's the trouble with you—one can't rely on the truth from you, Marigold. May I see the cloak?"

"I suppose you may," said Marigold, ungraciously. "I have a confession to make. The woman would not come down in price, so it will cost more than I, at first, imagined."

"How much more?"

By that time the cloak was removed from its padding of tissue, and Min gasped aloud at the sight of it. Margot was not less astonished in her silence, for it was a thing of beauty, indeed.

"Isn't it sweet?" said Marigold, insinuatingly. "Such delicious shades of blue and green in the quilted lining, and gold tissue! If it hadn't been a *sale*, I'd have had to pay double."

"What is the price of it?" Margot persisted, since it was she who was pledged to provide the money. And seeing a ticket at one corner, she took it up and found written in red ink, "Sale price 10 guineas". The original price marked on the same ticket and crossed out was "20 guineas". "Do you mean to say you are pledged to pay *all that*?—ten pounds, ten shillings, for this cloak? You led me to believe that it would coat *five-and-a-half*, and that you would pay *one pound* as deposit?"

"Don't look so alarmed and nasty about it," said Marigold. "I could have got that and twice that from Mr. Timpson, who was aching, all the afternoon, to give me things, but remembering—you know what—I was inflexible."

"But how do you suppose I am going to pay all that money?"

"Well," cried Min. "Margot is a sport if she offered to pay a bean! Megan wouldn't have."

"It isn't going to be any more than what you intended to pay," said Marigold. "Ten shillings a week for eight weeks, *and the deposit*. The balance is negligible."

"But that doesn't make ten guineas!"

"It does," Marigold returned shamefacedly, as she slung the cloak on a hanger and proceeded to put it away in her cupboard. "Only you are not reckoning on the deposit which had to be six pounds instead of one. The wretched creature stuck out for that. I had to pay half the money down—so—so—having the five pounds you gave me for Peter, and that extra one pound, I paid it, for it is as long as it is broad."

"Megan said that Margot has no money-sense. My word, Marigold, that applies to you. You'll have to marry a millionaire!" From Min.

Margot had no words with which to meet the case, and, turning, left the room. It would have given her the utmost satisfaction to have shaken Marigold till her teeth rattled, for she deserved to be roughly handled after so misrepresenting the affair of the cloak. But Marigold had proved before this that what she wanted she took at all costs, which had given rise to Megan's statement concerning her crookedness. "She can't run straight," Megan had often said, and Margot had thought her prejudiced.

So the debt to Peter remained unpaid.

The question of supper was another problem to face, but Min made up for her misbehaviour in the day by working capably and hard, thus showing that she could, when put to it, be useful. She and Margot prepared the usual, light supper, Megan still adhering to her determination

to starve. "Anyone can starve for twenty-four hours without dying or getting ill," was her retort when pressed to feed. "Leave me alone, or you'll drive me to put my head into the gas oven."

This from Megan gave Margot grave misgivings. She concluded that it had all to do with the opening of old wounds by Rolly Sherwell, and as Megan was doing some hard thinking all by herself, it was wisest to let her get on with it till she was sane enough to bring things into their rightful perspective. This love-business was akin to insanity when it took people so hard, and who had dreamt that Megan was so deeply in love as all that?

The girls met in Mrs. Cowen's room by request—all but Megan, who had no interest in anything at the moment, and were given the pleasure of looking through her jewel-case, as she was to determine which of her beautiful trinkets she could bear to sell. Jewellery had been a passion with her all her married life, and her childish delight in personal decoration, which Marigold had inherited, had made her two husbands load her with valuable jewellery on every state occasion.

"Ohs!" and "ahs!" and similar squeaks of delight punctuated the appearance of every gleaming piece or flashing gem. Necklaces of gold and pendants of brilliants; all manner of bracelets, some set with precious stones; earrings, brooches, and a fine collection of rings.

"Oh, Mummy! It's perfectly immoral of you to own all this when it means money buried all the time!" cried Marigold. "What's the good of it?"

"They are meant as heirlooms. With you girls to inherit them, one can't do away with them for the sake of mere trifles."

"At the same time, when we are all going shabby, what's the fun of knowing you have thousands of pounds locked up, just as gew-gaws!" cried Min.

"You'll have to get rid of some of these if you are to recover your health and live a normal life. As you must have clothes and there isn't any money with which to buy them, see what you can dispose of," suggested Margot,

"and give it to me. I'll try, to-morrow, after office closes, to see if I can get any reasonable offer in the city."

"It isn't only Mummy who wants clothes. Where do I come in, if she is taking me with her?" demanded Min.

"Of course, we'll have to see about your needs," said Mrs. Cowen. "But I dread the fuss and trouble of it all," sighing miserably, the light of keen anticipation in her eyes.

And while Min enumerated her requirements, Marigold drew out a double rope of pearls from a drawer in the jewel-case, which was the loveliest thing in necklaces they had seen.

"I had forgotten that," said Margot. "Of course, it is most valuable."

"It certainly is, and was to have been insured, only we put it off, and then forgot. Megan knows, for she suggested it."

"But how dangerous to keep it like this. Suppose you are robbed?"

"Don't! It is bad luck to say such things."

"Why not sell it? You have enough of jewellery not to miss this ravishing thing. Think, darling," cried Marigold, "you could buy a Morris Minor, and I'd drive you."

"Or a baby Austin," put in Min.

"Or a Cowley, and it will be an eternal liability, for cars cost money to run and garage, and in our circumstances it isn't done," said Margot. "If you get a thousand pounds, it won't go very far replenishing two people's wardrobe, and giving you money to spend while visiting."

"I don't mean to sell *that*," said Mrs. Cowen definitely, "as Marigold's father told me, on the occasion when he bought it, that I was to pass it on to Marigold as a wedding present."

"Is it for *me*?" Marigold's eyes leapt with excitement.

"When you are married—on your wedding day."

"That means it *is mine*, for I may marry very soon, there's no knowing."

"Has he said anything?"

"Who?" she asked, blushing as she fastened the ropes about her neck.

"You know perfectly well who I mean," said Mrs.

Cowen. "Anyone can see how the land lies with that young man."

"Let me get this valued, Mummy. I'll take great care of it. I'd love to know what it is worth, and if it is meant to be mine, I have a right to know the value."

"I don't mind if you are very careful not to lose it. It will be your loss, remember, though at present it belongs to me."

"I adore pretty things and jewels," said Marigold, "but I do think it more essential to be up to date in one's clothes. You have to dress well, whereas you needn't have costly jewels when imitations look just as well and no one is a bit the wiser." She slipped the pearls into her pocket while Margot helped their mother to decide on which rings and brooches she would realise money. She could never wear all the rings she possessed, and the money would certainly be more useful. Finally, it was settled and Margot carried away the jewels in her money bag, leaving Mrs. Cowen to discuss with her favourite daughter, Marigold, the matter of a new outfit for herself. Already she looked different with the light of hope in her faded eyes, and colour in her cheeks.

"Get up, darling, and walk three times round your bed," cried Marigold. "I bet you'll be running round to-morrow."

"Look! she's as pretty as a picture!" teased Min. "Wait and she'll cut you out, Marigold. Come along Mums, you'll soon be jazzing at a *thé dansant*, and rivalling your precious daughters."

"Don't be silly!" cried Mrs. Cowen, simpering with delight.

"And you'll be getting married again. I hope it will be someone rich, darling," said Marigold, "and then you can make me an allowance so that I can afford to marry a poor man."

"Marigold wants to marry Peter, but is afraid she might get fed up with having to do without things. Mr. Timpson's prospective Rolls-Royce is a great temptation whenever she thinks of Peter Dunbar's Ford in Malaya. I know she suffers excruciatingly when she thinks of it!"

"Shut up, Min! Peter hasn't a Ford, and there is no question about which of the men I would choose when it comes to the point."

In the meantime, Margot took Megan a cup of tea and had the satisfaction of seeing her drink it. Since she showed signs of reviving interest in the family concerns, she was told of the day's happenings and allowed to pronounce on them.

"I am very glad Mummy is going. It will wake her up and take her out of herself. It will be a positive relief to be rid of Min for a month. Let her go by all means. I hope you'll get a good sum for the rings, for *we* can't spare a penny."

Margot kept silent on the subject of Marigold's opera cloak. It was torture to think of how her debt to Peter could not be paid, all because Marigold hadn't the self-denial to do without that opulent cloak. It would either have to stand over, or she must just see what else she could part with from her little store of antique jewels, but feared they were worthless. Megan, however, had something further to say.

"I am just wondering about things and if it is fair that helpless and selfish people should prey as they do on the useful members of the community. It's like the dole. So long as people get kept at no cost to themselves, they don't trouble to be self-supporting. Marigold would soon have to marry, or work for her living, if I died or made up my mind to get a job and clear out of the country. You could not support the family alone, and it would force them to do something."

"What do you suppose Mummy could do?—poor Mums! Doesn't it strike you that she has never properly grown up? She has a very childlike outlook, and no backbone at all."

"Mummy would have to sell all her stock of jewels, invest the money to advantage, and live on the interest. Marigold would find a husband without loss of time, and Min could get a job. I'm not sure but that it's a mistake to prevent her, whatever the risk, for she will go to the bad, any way."

"How can you voice such a thought!"

"It is true, nevertheless. She's all sex and no brains, and won't lack chances of going to the devil if she has to seek them. I'll have to find out what she's after when she goes out with that flighty flapper upstairs. I don't trust her any more than I trust Min, though Min has Marigold to thank for her precocity. Marigold has a lot to be responsible for where the kid is concerned, filling her head with all that sentimental tosh whenever she wants someone to blow off steam to. Ugh! they are a lively pair."

"Have you answered that letter?"

"No! And don't mean to."

"And suppose you are unfair to him?"

"I have my pride and know my own business best."

## CHAPTER X

### MORAL OBLIQUITY

MRS. COWEN's case was a triumph of mind over matter, for she found she had no time to consider her symptoms in the rush of the preparations for her visit to Essex. Stacks of dresses 'on appro' took up her attention, and she forgot to feel faint and ill after an hour spent in trying them on. Never in her life had she bought ready-made dresses at sales, but dressmakers were clearing their autumn stocks, and there were many only too glad to oblige customers by serving them in their homes. With Marigold to advise and Margot to criticise, she was soon well equipped for her visit out of the proceeds of a few rings and bracelets, while Min paid several visits to High Street, Kensington, with Megan who had revived and showed a relentless determination not to allow the flapper a free hand in her selection of an outfit.

For the moment, the matter of the pearls was forgotten till some days later Marigold herself restored them to the

jewel case, well pleased, she said, to know that they were of considerable value.

"How much?" asked Mrs. Cowen enviously, since it was a matter of conscience not to sell them, whatever their value. Heirlooms were heirlooms and had their duty to posterity.

"Two thousand," said Marigold, unwilling to discuss the subject since she would far rather have had the money.

"If you had it, you'd spend it on expensive furs and heaps of priceless frocks," said Min. "Just as well you aren't to get it till you marry, and then you will have to remember that you can't sell it, as it will have to be handed down. It's in Daddy's will."

"Rubbish!" retorted Marigold. "Mummy never said it was in the will."

"It mightn't have been actually mentioned, but Dad told her that it would have to be an heirloom for you and your children."

"I shan't have children," said Marigold, "so I'll do as I like with it."

"You haven't got it yet, and Mummy might yet have to realise on it, now that she's going all out to make the most of her chances. She hasn't much time, and expense seems no object where she is concerned, while I have to content myself with any old thing Megan chooses to get. It's so unfair."

"You are a very rude child," cried Mrs. Cowen. "How dare you talk so disrespectfully?"

"Well, you are going it strong, aren't you? but if it makes you well and will bring you luck, I shall be the last to complain."

Mrs. Cowen slapped her cheek feebly, then drew her down to be kissed. "I am sure my Baby loves her Mummy and would never mean to be nasty to her." And there the subject of the pearls ended for the time being.

Marigold was again out daily with Peter, who was making the most of his chances before Christmas as he was engaged to spend Christmas Day with his sister at Hove, much against his secret wishes, and had to fulfil a long-standing promise to visit Malaya friends in Scotland



immediately after. He hated having to leave London when he was finding it so amazingly attractive, and the fact that his place with Marigold could so easily be taken, made him fearful of possibilities. The more he contemplated his position, the easier it was to argue himself into believing he was justified in proposing marriage to Marigold. The main thing was, she did not discourage his attentions and even showed in countless ways that she was not indifferent to him. At times he felt walking on air, so sure was he that he had only to speak to win her, and so often, his spirits fell to zero at the thought of how little he was able to give her in return for so wonderful a sacrifice.

Kit had asked him if he meant to make Marigold his wife? for, if so, he should let her know all she must expect out East; so Peter took many opportunities of talking to Marigold of his life in Malaya, and biased his tales with stories of the fortitude of women who accompanied their men out there to share whatever of hardships were unavoidable. Women were such amazing creatures, and he took off his hat to the splendid wives and mothers he met. They seemed to like the life, strange as it may appear, and made things lively at the club. He did not know what the fellows would do but for the women.

Marigold, however, was inattentive. She was not interested in other women living in Malaya, and thought nothing of their sacrifices. If a woman loved a man, she should be ready to go to the ends of the earth with him. It was then no sacrifice, but her happiness. What was happiness? she asked, with innocent eyes lifted shyly to his as they discussed the subject during an interval at the theatre. Was there ever any question as to the joy of being able to be all things to the beloved one? What did it matter where one lived, if with the only being that mattered in the whole world?

And Peter thrilled and glowed as many men before him, when listening to such sweet flattery from the lips of the adored idol of his dreams. How was it possible to wrench himself away in order to spend a bored week divided between Hove and Scotland when every day of that week could be spent in London with Marigold? She

was the most precious thing in life, and it was a sheer joy to be with her, listening to her soft voice prattling inconsequences like music. It mattered little if what she said hadn't a grain of sense in it and was all about trifles, personal and abstract, or if she was not quite as loyal to her family as blood relations should be. It was everybody else's fault, never hers, that they did not get on perfectly, for he was convinced that never was there a girl with a sweeter disposition, more loving and pliable. Every day, he felt that he was approaching nearer and nearer the crisis that would seal his fate, one way or the other, and he was less nervous and doubtful of his chances after his last return from Hove when preparations were being hurried for Mrs. Cowen and Min to leave for Moreton Gadsby. He could not forget the ingenuous delight with which he was welcomed the afternoon he dropped in, fresh from Hove, and saw Marigold alone in the sitting-room surrounded with household mending. Apparently, Megan had heaved the contents of the linen cupboard at the poor little thing and had kept her hard at her job since luncheon. It was too bad!

"Oh!"—as she sprang to her feet with a gasp. "Peter!—you never said you were coming to-day!" All her work materials were scattered about the floor, reels of cotton rolling under furniture, thimbles shooting around, a pair of scissors dug themselves into the carpet, and buttons were broadcast like daisies on the lawn. What did she care? He had come back, and the pleasure of seeing him made her almost hysterical. "I—I thought you were to stay for some badminton tournament or dance?"

Both her hands were in his and, with a little encouragement, she would have been in his arms, but Peter managed to be self-controlled, though his heart pounded like a sledge-hammer.

"Kit wanted me to, but—I simply couldn't. I had to come back."

"Oh, I am so glad. I have been lost without you!"

"Yet, there were so many fellows simply dying to take you about?"

She screwed up her face contemptuously. "Oh, *they!* I couldn't be bothered with them."

They then retrieved the contents of the work basket and by the time they were gathered the others came in and conversation became general. Marigold, however, did not refuse to dine that evening with him, shamelessly rushing upstairs to a neighbour's telephone to break her engagement with the man named 'Timpson.' And when he heard from Min that this 'Timpson' was the millionaire from Texas who had set his heart on Marigold, he was to be excused for reacting to the compliment. Timpson was a man, whom the girls alluded to as 'Monkey Brand', not only because of his ugliness, but because, by eliminating the 'k', he was of the 'brand' that spelled 'money'. Timpson was rolling in riches, yet Marigold had proved that she was not mercenary by her offhand treatment of him. So he was not jealous of the fellow, nor of any other, now that she had made it clear whom she would rather have as her companion.

"Won't he be peeved at your shaking him off like this?" he asked on her return.

"You bet your life," put in Min, "she's made a jolly good excuse. Leave Marigold alone when it comes to managing her beaux."

"Of course, Min knows all about it!" said Marigold gently, and Peter needed nothing more to convince him how much she had to contend against in her family circle.

After that, for days they had a succession of engagements, while everyone interested wondered when the news would be broken to them that Marigold and Peter were engaged.

It however came about through an unexpected crisis which required a large demand on Peter's faith to see it through her eyes. But Peter was of all things loyal and sporting. Even he could stretch a point and make allowances for circumstances and natures, with the result that he was more than ever tender and pitiful towards the beautiful girl he had decided to make his wife. It was a very real love at its noblest and best, and Marigold had it all.

It happened that when all the bills were paid, Megan's sound judgment and advice prevailed on Mrs. Cowen to be practical instead of sentimental concerning the pearl necklace. After all, Mr. Cowen had done nothing but express a hope. But he did not know how things would turn out at the time he gave his wife the pearl necklace. Circumstances altered cases, and her great need of a bank balance to meet all contingencies and bills, to say nothing of the doctor's which had remained unpaid and was a nightmare to Megan, made it imperative that such an asset as the ropes of pearls should immediately be converted into money. Mrs. Cowen would never wear the pearls when she delighted in coloured glass beads and such art jewellery as the fashion made attractive, then why trouble about Marigold, who would be sure to fall on her feet when she married, and could do without so expensive a wedding present? Besides, it was hardly fair that Min should not equally benefit, and there was no such present for her.

As Mrs. Cowen was waved by every wind that blew, she yielded, and Megan carried off the pearls to a West End jeweller's in the hope of getting an offer.

When she returned, it was with a pinched look on her face and every appearance of having received a knock-out blow.

She said nothing to her mother or Min, and Marigold, being out, waited till Margot came home, when she took her into the room they shared, and locked the door.

"Something dreadful has happened," she said, with a tragic look, producing the pearls from her pocket and laying them on the dressing-table. "Marigold came home with them, saying they are worth two thousand pounds—you remember?"

Margot nodded.

"They are imitation. Only the diamond clasp is real. What do you think of that?"

Margot stared, gulped, trying to take in the stupendous fact. "They *were* real!"

"Exactly. Mr. Cowen used to lock them in his safe. Mummy used to wear them only on state occasions."

"Mightn't we all have been mistaken?—some fraud——"

"The fraud has only just occurred. Listen. The clasp is real. They don't put real diamonds in a clasp if the pearls are faked. And Marigold put them away, saying they were valued at two thousand." Megan sat down as if her knees refused to support her, and Margot also seemed in need of support.

"Then you think . . ."

"I do. I never dreamt that she could stoop to that, but—she's rotten—she's got the heart of a crook. She doesn't care a blow for what's honest, what's straight——"

"Oh, don't condemn her before we have given her a chance to explain. Someone might have pulled her leg, and——" But that was preposterous.

Marigold was not expected back till midnight as Peter had taken her to a hotel dance and cabaret. Nevertheless, Megan sat up for her and insisted that Margot should keep her company.

"We've got to see this thing through," said she, when Min was asleep and not likely to be eavesdropping, which Megan believed was not beyond her capabilities. "I have to get at the bottom of the mystery and shall take my own way of finding it out. Don't you interfere, but just sit still and take notice."

"But, you can't imagine—Surely you *can't* think that——" Margot hoped against hope.

"I am not prepared to say anything. Let's see what Marigold has to say about it."

"Of course, she can't say more than she said before. If someone was having a laugh at her, it is not her fault that she said it was worth two thousand!"

Megan said nothing, but read the evening paper which Margot had brought home with her, picked up in the train, having being discarded by a passenger. Margot tried to speak in defence of Marigold, who, though untrustworthy in various ways, had never perpetrated a fraud of such a criminal nature in her life. It wanted someone far more hardened and defiant to think of such barefaced cheating, for it was nothing less. Megan, however, remained unmoved.

Finally, Margot retired to help her mother to bed, and

yawning widely returned to the living-room only to fall asleep on the couch, while Megan followed the cross-examination of a witness for the defence in a dramatic murder trial.

When Margot came to earth again, a motor-car was throbbing at the gate. Marigold had arrived and was probably bidding Peter good-bye on the doormat.

"I hope you will not rush this like a bull at a gate. Remember—it is rather terrible to accuse one of our own blood with such a dastardly act. I cannot believe anyone decent could do what you think," Margot protested in a whisper.

"No one decent could. But Marigold and Min are their father's children. They aren't too scrupulous in small things, and it is only a step from lies to cheating."

Margot felt physically sick at the thought of the coming interview, and was almost sorry for Marigold, hoping she would make good her story. The thought that anyone belonging to her could be guilty of such wickedness as Megan suspected, was unthinkable.

Light footsteps. Marigold turned the door-knob and entered looking like a magazine illustration of a prize beauty fresh from a newspaper contest. Her cheeks glowed through the surface rouge, her lips were like red rosebuds, her eyes luminous with the knowledge of her own power to sway men; but at sight of Megan and Margot, she stopped and stared. No one ever sat up for her, why now? Something in Megan's look as she rose and approached her, signalled danger, and she tried to laugh.

"What *ever* is the matter? You look so funny."

"I fail to see where the fun comes in. I just want a word with you."

"You don't sit up to talk to me so late. What's happened?"

"That's for you to explain. Look here, Marigold, no beating about the bush. I want the truth and no more deceit. It is about those pearls."

"What about them?" Not being a hardened sinner, Marigold's face blanched, leaving the rouge faintly in relief against the deathly whiteness of her face. To avoid

looking at Megan she busied herself removing her opera cloak, and Margot subconsciously admired its richness.

"You know best. Who told you they were worth two thousand pounds?"

"Why do you ask? I—I had them seen by a man in the City, and that's what he said."

"If I tell you that I have just had them examined by an expert and he says that they are imitations, what have you to say?"

Marigold's face was now as red as it had been white. "How can I account for that? Why do you ask me?"

"Because I believe you can account for the mystery. They were genuine pearls when you took them away a few days ago, and you return them with the same clasp, but the pearls substituted by fakes. Do you know, my girl, if I called in the police to-morrow, you'd have to clear yourself of a very serious charge. One that would put you into Borstal or a penitentiary of some sort. But I'm giving you a chance of confessing what you did with the money and why you stooped to such a degrading act?"

"Oh, Megan!" murmured Margot, who could never have gone to such lengths, no matter how certain she felt of Marigold's culpability.

"How dare you accuse me! I won't stand it. What proof have you that I changed the pearls? This is dreadful! You are taking away my good name. You hate me, that's why you are doing it!"

"Stop your heroics! Your face shows your guilt. If you won't confess the truth, I swear that I shall hand you over to the police. Decide, and I'll telephone to Scotland Yard, however late it is, and then you can tell what story you please, but the police have ways of digging out the truth. Two thousand pounds! You never thought that anyone would wish to verify it or that the pearls would ever need to be sold, so sure were you that they were to be yours that you imagined you were safe to sell them and put imitations in their place! Only you took jolly good care to transfer the clasp!"

Marigold burst into tears, crying unintelligibly that Megan was cruel! cruel! She had no heart, no feeling.

Margot could only stare with her big eyes at their widest as Marigold's defence broke down and she collapsed in hysteria.

"Hush!" cried Megan sternly. "You'll wake Mummy and Min, and unless you want all the world to know what has happened, you had better stop howling. Now, am I to telephone or not?"

"What do you want—me—to do?" sobbed Marigold.

"Say what you did and why you did it."

After a brief interval, when Marigold could control her sobs, she made her explanation.

"Mummy said it was for me—it was as—as good as mine, so—so—as I wanted the money instead, I—I—did that."

"Did what?" Megan asked relentlessly.

"Sub—sub—stituted the sham ones with the clasp from the other, and—and the man who valued the pearls bought them. He made the change as Mummy wanted the pearls to keep till I married."

"What did you want with the money?"

"Mr.—Mr. Timpson," sobbed Marigold piteously, looking prettier in her distress than Margot had ever seen her, "Mr. Timpson was with me when I—I saw the jeweller, as I could not go alone, and he said I should in—invest the money so as to make it double in a little while. He knew of lots of ways."

"Did he know it was stolen property?"

"It wasn't stolen!" Marigold stamped her foot while a fresh gust of weeping overcame her. "How—how can you steal what is as good as yours?"

"You knew well enough you were doing wrong when you went to the trouble of replacing the pearls with sham beads——"

"Because Mummy wanted the thing back, and I did it to save fuss."

"But you knew full well that the pearls were not yours till you got married. They were Mummy's, so you stole them, and theft is punishable by law. What happened to the money?"

"I gave it to Mr. Timpson to—to invest so that I would



have enough for my trousseau. I knew that *you* wouldn't give me enough, and clothes cost a lot. Besides, I didn't think I was doing anything dreadful. It was only taking beforehand what was my own."

"Now—listen. This is what I'm going to do. You'll go to-morrow to Mr. Timpson and ask him for the money back. He's got to return it, as you have no right to gamble with it since it does not belong to you. *Get that money back*, and don't ever do this sort of thing again, or you'll be called a thief and the law will send you to prison."

"You surely wou—wouldn't call in the po—police, Megan?" sobbed Marigold thoroughly cowed. "People don't do such things in families!"

"Don't they? Make no mistake about it. I'd have no mercy on you if ever you were up to such tricks again. You'd have the lesson of your life and your name would be mud. No decent man would want to marry you. It was bad enough what your father did, and it would be said that the same kink of dishonesty was coming out in his children."

"Don't Megan," whispered Margot. "She's had enough. What worries me is that Marigold seems to have no moral sense. How are you going to teach it to her?"

"You can't teach it to her. These things are bred in the bone. It's the way she's made, and I pity the man she marries. He'll not be able to trust her further than he sees her unless she's so darned clever that she hoodwinks him past belief. Fine lookout for Peter Dunbar if he is in earnest."

Margot suffered a twist of the heart to think of Peter—dear, simple-hearted fellow, adoring Marigold and utterly unconscious of her true character. Yet, did she quite realise the enormity of her act? Wasn't it some sort of moral obliquity for which she was not responsible?—inherited from her father, which made it impossible for her to appreciate fine points of honour and truth?

"We needn't let this go farther," said Megan in her inflexible voice, "once Marigold does what it required of her. Only I shall insist on fairness to Peter. He is Kit's brother, and Kit is my best friend. I will not allow

him to keep up with Marigold blindfolded, as it were. He ought to know what she has done. It is nothing but right for him to have his eyes opened to just where he stands, then let him please himself. I'll wash my hands of the whole business, feeling that at least I am not a party to——"

Here Marigold nearly screamed in her rage and hysteria.

"It is nothing but revenge—revenge and jealousy! Megan hates me. She hates to think that—that Peter—likes me best. Kit's brother—and he never looked at her, but prefers to go with me. How can you be so cruel, you *beast!* to say you will tell Peter?"

"Hush!" cried Margot. "Megan isn't jealous of Peter. She feels as if we have no right to let him down, that's all. But Megan wouldn't tell him for worlds. She has too much pride."

"She says she will! Tell her, Margot, that she mustn't! I will die of shame. I'll never look him in the face again—he'll never come any more—oh!—oh! what are you *doing* to me!"

"Listen," cried Megan, shaking her by the shoulder. "*I'll* not tell him, but *you* shall. Do you hear? You shall tell him to-morrow when he comes to see you, just how abominably you behaved, and why. Let him know that you committed theft for the sake of buying fashionable clothes. Let him hear about the faked pearls, and then if he can overlook it, my conscience will be clear, and it will be his own funeral if he still means to go around with you and ultimately ask you to marry him. He's old enough and travelled enough to know what he's getting when he hears this precious tale. But mind you tell all of it, for I'll make him repeat what he's heard from you to prove you've been thorough. That's all. I'm through—for to-night."

Megan then retired to bed and Margot sat on talking to the culprit, trying to bring her to a sense of her moral lapse.

Marigold, however, was too frightened to listen, and in the end rushed away to her room, saying that she had been given an impossible task. Nevertheless, she

was happier at the thought of being deputed to confess her sins to Peter, instead of Megan doing it in her blunt way, for she had great faith in her power to plead her own case with her biased judge. The matter of the money would be the least of her anxieties, for Tony Timpson told her that it would take a little time—perhaps a week or so, to find the best investment for the money and nothing could as yet have been done, for it was only a week since she had given him the two thousand pounds. Five days since she had last seen him, but he had promised to write when he had settled things and would arrange to give her the papers to sign.

After a restless night, during which she was haunted by policemen wearing ropes of pearls round their necks and Peter walking up the aisle of a church with Megan as his bride, she rose unrefreshed in the morning and, making a poor breakfast, dressed to go out.

Megan, who was at her accustomed post behind the teapot, gave her one glance, which meant volumes; but Margot kept pushing the toast rack at her and offering her the butter.

"What's the matter with Marigold? Are you sickening for mumps or anything?" asked Min, curiously, for generally Marigold's appetite gave none of the family anxiety.

"I just—can't eat," snapped Marigold.

"What a temper—but don't eat my head off," she expostulated. "I am only showing sisterly concern."

"Keep it. I have no use for sisterly feelings, knowing what they are worth."

"Will you be back for lunch?" asked Margot, who was in a hurry to be away to her work. "Because if you are not, you can meet me up at Mansion House Station and we can lunch at a little place I know."

"Thanks," said Marigold, "but Peter wants me to lunch with him and I will 'phone him in town."

Nothing more was said, for Margot felt easier in mind when she knew that Marigold was planning a normal outing. Her mutinous face and red-rimmed eyes made her wonder if Megan was not driving the foolish girl too far. In bitterness and revenge, undisciplined natures did terrible and

irrevocable things. However—thank God, for Peter! Again, that twist of the heart to think of the wealth of love he was wasting on one who had not the intelligence to appreciate it at its worth.

Margot took a bus at Notting Hill Gate to which she walked to save a penny; but Marigold called a taxi as she left the Crescent and was driven to an address in Pall Mall.

The house was dark, tall and dignified, as become respectable Chambers rented by members of a notable Club, and asking the driver to wait, she rang the front door bell.

A manservant came to the door in answer to her ring and looked surprised at her question.

"No, Miss," said he. "No such gentleman lodges here. Let me see? . . ." He tried to recall the name. "Mr. Timpson? Perhaps he's the gen'leman what used to put up 'casionally with Mr. Banks. I'll inquire, Miss, and let you know."

This was perplexing, for Mr. Timpson had distinctly given her this address as his rooms in town.

No information being forthcoming, Marigold thanked the servant and drove to Mr. Timpson's Club.

Here she was equally unsuccessful in a very alarming way, for she was told by the clerk at the bureau that "a Mr. Timpson who had been elected a temporary member by one of the members—a Mr. Banks—had left for Moscow three days ago, and had omitted to mention his address."

"Are you sure that it is the gentleman I am asking for?" she pressed, her eyes looking scared. "He is short and stout, rather dark, *very* plain——"

"And wears a solitaire diamond on his left hand little finger, also a diamond pin in his tie?" said the clerk.

"Yes! That's him. Surely—surely—but he never said he was—oh, dear! Doesn't anyone here know if he is coming back?"

"He isn't coming back, I know, Miss, for certain, as he was saying in my hearing to his friend while they were talking together over there"—and he pointed to a settee—"that he didn't think he could possibly return to England

for years as he had some big business on hand which would need his constant and most arduous attention."

"If that is so, I need not stay—but—I heard that he was from Texas?"

The clerk smiled. "Oh, no, Miss. He's from Moscow right enough, for his friend is a naturalised Russian and they do business with Russia."

"I heard that he is a millionaire—so someone informed me."

"He was having a joke, Miss, for Mr. Timpson is just a traveller for a Russian firm. Well off, I dare say, but not a millionaire."

Marigold almost staggered out and down the steps to her waiting taxi. It was a knock-out blow, indeed!

Not a millionaire?—and Rolly Sherwell had told her he was! Naturally, she had believed him, for he had introduced Mr. Timpson to her at Ranelagh. What did he mean by so misleading her? How had he any acquaintance with a crook? For what else could Mr. Timpson be but an adventurer and a crook? He had robbed her—unsuspicious fool that she was, of two thousand pounds, paid by cheque over the counter! She had signed it like a trusting fool, for what was two thousand to a millionaire? And she had trusted him to invest it to advantage for her!

She felt sick and faint. What was she to do?

What, but run to Peter for consolation?

Peter did not expect her to telephone till eleven as, by then, he would be at his club and he would call at the flat for her. It was just ten o'clock, so she decided to look him up at his rooms, for he had rented a service flat in Victoria. Peter—her beloved Peter! He would understand. He would pity and defend her!

## CHAPTER XI

## THE PLEDGE

MARIGOLD dismissed her taxi and ran into the building with the one idea in her mind, of making a buffer of Peter against all her vengeful enemies. She had paid her last penny to the driver of the taxi, but she need have no anxieties, for Peter would see her through all her troubles. She had no doubt of the strength and sincerity of his passion. His love for her would bias his judgment in her favour even if he heard the whole story, so long as he heard it from her lips and in her own way. At that moment, she loved Peter as she had never thought it possible to love anyone in the world, and all she wanted to do was to weep her heart out in his arms and be comforted.

For nothing at all, she was being hounded and branded a criminal! as if what she had done was at all extraordinary or unjustifiable, seeing that the pearls were her own. It was certainly dreadful to have lost all that money, but people lost fortunes without making a shout about it. All it wanted was a little understanding, some sympathy and tolerance. But Megan had none, and Marigold was convinced that she was quite capable of calling in the police, if for no other reason than to destroy her, and lower her pride in the dust. Megan had never forgiven her for taking Rolly Sherwell from her, as if she were to blame for his fickleness! Men were notoriously fickle, and if Megan could not hold him, it was her fault for being so heavy and unattractive. But she was now top dog and would do incalculable harm unless Peter intervened to save the situation. Megan would never go against Peter, and a word from him would go a long way, for he was Kit's brother and Megan respected him.

She reached the lift breathlessly and asked the porter to take her to Mr. Dunbar's rooms.

The porter stared very hard at the lovely little lady and put his tongue in his cheek as he slammed the door of the lift and they ascended. Second floor.

"Mr. Dunbar's suite is the first door on the left, Miss," said he. "But I don't know as he's in. He went out not long ago and I haven't seen him return."

"How then can I get in?" she asked, dismayed.

"I'll speak to the caretaker. Him and his missus do for the gentlemen, and may have a key."

Marigold waited anxiously for the man's return, standing alone beside the lift-shaft and wincing as a chilly draught blew upwards into her face. If she could only get in she could wait and telephone, and Peter would come on the wings of the wind. He was bound to be at his club at eleven.

A florid, butler-looking person of some importance to himself ascended in the lift and stepped out, looking with suspicion at the unexpected visitor.

"Mr. Dunbar isn't in, Madam," said he. "And I 'ave no authority to let anyone into his flat. I'm afraid I can't do it."

"I must see him, and it's very urgent," said Marigold with all the battery of sweet looks and smiles directed at the implacable caretaker.

"I'm afraid you'll 'ave to call again, Madam. No good my doing what's not reg'lar. You'll 'ave to call again."

Marigold was almost hysterical. "I want to telephone to him that I am here. I know him very well and he expects to meet me to-day."

"There's public telephones heverywhere."

How could she tell him she had no money in her purse? If only she had come by bus, she would have had money enough and to spare, but she never knew that she was to meet with such dire calamity!

"He expects me to telephone him at eleven, and—it just happens that I dropped my purse. I had it in my handbag, but it's gone and unless I 'phone from here, I don't know what to do." It struck her in passing how easy it was to lie, and how impossible it was to avoid

doing so when up against things and checkmated at every turn. She was sure that everyone lied when the occasion warranted, and it was sheer hypocrisy for Megan and Margot to lay such stress on being truthful at all costs. Honesty was not always the best policy, she had discovered, let people say what they liked.

"If so be as you'll pardon my saying so, come back at eleven Ma'am, and if Mr. Dunbar ain't back, I'll go with you myself and let you use his telephone. That won't do any damage."

"Thank you," and Marigold retired to walk the streets till eleven. She felt very helpless and frightened at the catastrophe that had befallen her and the ease with which she had been cheated and deceived. Her little fraudulent effort to obtain in advance what she regarded as her own property, was completely eclipsed by a professional rogue's confidence-trick. Believing him a millionaire she was not to blame for trusting him with money. No one had any right to hold her responsible for the embezzlement and loss of that two thousand pounds, for she had no reason for distrusting Mr. Timpson. It was Rolly Sherwell's fault for telling her a lie. She could now understand why he did it—just spite. He always regarded her as mercenary and had said she would sell her soul for money. Thank heaven, she had been saved by the coming of Peter, from justifying his opinion of her! It was beastly of Rolly, and he had acted vindictively because she had shown him how well she knew how to take care of herself and where the line was to be drawn between a flirtation and folly. She had no use for Rolly at any time, and could not understand what Megan saw in him to make her ready to become his wife. Not that Rolly was ever a marrying man, thought Marigold, for with all his pursuit of her, from the moment he dropped Megan, he had never once proposed marriage. Megan was an optimist to imagine that he was serious in his attentions. He was only trying how far he could go with her, and had too little money to make the game worth the candle. So he played that dirty trick about Timpson just to have a little of his own back, and had very nearly ruined everything. Marigold was well aware of the terrible



risks she had run while going about with such an unscrupulous man as Timpson, and she thanked heaven again that physical repulsion alone had made her hold herself in reserve under circumstances when the temptation to captivate a millionaire had all but made her lose her head. What an escape she had had! and again she owed it to Peter's lovable personality that she had definitely decided to take him and discard all her other suitors. At the moment, Marigold had never been so sincere or well intentioned.

Her heart almost stopped beating when at length she returned to Peter's flat and was taken by the man-servant into his sitting-room to telephone. It was a room eloquent of Peter himself in the simplicity of its aspect, its unpretentious furnishing and cleanliness. A writing table by the window accommodated the telephone, and Marigold seized it as a friend and called the number she wanted.

"Oh!" she gasped in relief as Peter arrived, by request, at the other end. "Peter—*Peter!*—it's Marigold speaking." Breathlessly. "I'm not at the house, but here, in your rooms. Dreadful things have happened"—breaking off as she remembered the caretaker who was standing by. "Can you come soon? I have too much to tell you. But the man here won't let me stay. Will you tell him to let me stop in here till you come?" She passed the receiver to the florid gentleman from the basement and listened to his apologetic conversation with Peter, whose voice was unmistakable.

"I acted as I thought in your int'rest, sir, as I 'ad no horders to the contrary, but if you say it's orl right, then it is orl right, and begging your pardon if it's been a mistake, sir."

Laying down the receiver, he tried to explain the situation and nearly succeeded in making matters very much worse by allowing Marigold to get the impression that ladies were in the habit of spending their leisure hours in bachelors' rooms. Sometimes complications arose when two met unexpectedly and both demanded the right to remain—but at this point Marigold interrupted him anxiously.

"Do you want me to understand that Mr. Dunbar—

I mean that other lady visitors call on him and claim the right to stay?"

"Begging your pardon, Miss, Mr. Dunbar ain't that sort. But the gen'leman before him was a rare one, and the hussies that made free——"

"I have no interest in him, or them, so you needn't say any more."

Definitely snubbed, the caretaker retired and closed the door. Not long afterwards it opened to admit Peter, who had lost no time on the road, and Marigold's unexpected reception of him robbed him of the power to see things in their right perspective, and brought reason to naught.

Having borne up as long as it was physically possible, her nerves collapsed and she lay sobbing passionately in Peter's arms, her own clasped about his neck. Such ejaculations between heartrending sobs as—"I thought I should have died, waiting! Oh, Peter—save me, save me! Your little Marigold is in such ghastly trouble!" alarmed him beyond expression, and he could only kiss the tears away and call her by all the passionately endearing names known to a lover's vocabulary.

"Tell me all that has happened, sweet."

"Oh, Peter, do you love me!"

"Of course, darling. Haven't I been demonstrating it for weeks on end?" And he kissed her reverently on the lips.

"You never said it, but I felt you did, and because I love you I came straight to you in my trouble. Peter! Megan is persecuting me. She says she will send me to *gaol*!" her voice ended in an agonised wail.

"But—how absurd! Sweetheart! . . . What does it mean? How could she do anything of the sort?"

"I am so frightened. Everything has gone wrong, and I am being hounded, just like a poor little fox when the pack is on its trial."

Of course, Peter strained her to him comfortingly. As if he was going to allow any member of her family to bully her and frighten her so! "It's only bluff, Marigold. You don't for a moment believe that such a thing is possible where *you* are concerned."

"She says so and would do it. Oh, oh, don't let her, Peter!"

He kissed her flushed face again and again, tasted the salt of her tears, revelled in the soft texture of her unrivalled skin against his cheek, smothered her sobs with his lips. "Tell me all about it, darling. I'm the right person, for you are going to belong to me henceforth. Do you love me? Say it again." And she said it with all the tender witchery of loveliness and sublime youth. After which she commanded her breath to the service of elucidating the mystery in the way most calculated to appeal to Peter's chivalry and protective instincts.

"Peter, darling, perhaps I'm very trusting—perhaps I have not learned to be suspicious. I don't know. Or I'm a fool. Anyway, I did a very foolish thing, without thinking it was wrong—will you believe that, Peter?"

"I believe everything you tell me, sweetest," cried Peter, still in transports of sheer delight.

"Oh, you are so precious! I'll tell you what happened. It was like this," caressing his rough cheek with tender touches, occasionally raising pathetic blue eyes to his, while her head lay on his breast. "Mummy showed me a pearl necklace that Daddy gave her for *me*. It was to be mine when I married. She said it was very valuable, but did not know how much it was worth, and asked me to have it valued in town. It was quite a lovely necklace, but only a silly ornament after all, and when the man told me it was worth two thousand pounds—that is, he said he would give me that for it, I thought immediately that it was a sin to lock up all that money in a jewel-case when we are all so poor. Besides, it was mine—*mine*! You see that? So I carried it about all day, then I thought I would get someone to advise me, who was certain to care for my interests, for we were good friends and he a very rich man . . ."

"Mr. Timpson?"

"Yes. I remembered him and telephoned for him to meet me at tea, and I showed him the pearls. You were at Hove, or I should have gone to you. Well, he told me that imitation pearls would look just as good,

and no one be the wiser. He advised me to sell the pearls to the jeweller, who was reputable in the town and could be trusted to make a fair deal, and to invest the money in such a way that it could be doubled and trebled in a week. Of course, that sounded wonderful! I thought that with all that money locked up I would be free to do what I wished, and that was—that was . . .” her voice died to a whisper and ceased.

“What was that?” he urged, stealing another kiss from the tempting lips so near.

“Can’t you guess?” an upward flicker of her melting eyes.

“I can’t at all,” said the inattentive Peter, whose mind was chaotic, like his emotions.

“Oh, Peter!—spare me. What did I want more than anything in the world? It was—to—to marry a *poor* man. There, you made me say it,” and she hid her face in his breast.

“Was that me?” asked Peter, with whom the accuracy of grammar was, at such a crisis, negligible.

“Who else?”

“Oh, my sweetheart! You thought of *me*?”

“I always think of you. So I was tempted—and I fell, Peter. I thought that being my own pearls I could do as I liked with them. I thought what a lot of money I’d be able to give you to tide over your difficulties, so I sold the pearls. But first the jeweller was able to match them closely in faked beads, and so as not to upset Mummy, the same clasp was put on the imitation ropes. I knew that she was bound to make a fuss if she heard that I had sold the pearls, as she was determined to make them silly heirlooms. As if one wants heirlooms when the money is far more useful! Well,” she continued, not noticing that Peter had suddenly grown deathly still, and that the colour had left his cheeks. “I took back the imitation pearls, darling, for there was no use in inviting a terrible row, and nothing was said at the time. You see, I knew they were fakes, and only I was going to be the loser,” said Marigold, with restored self-confidence. “That makes it a very different matter from stealing, doesn’t it? But

Megan can't differentiate. She went clean off the deep end after she had the imitation pearls tested, wishing to sell them for Mummy to buy herself clothes and have a bank balance—just because she is too mean."

"Stop, dear. Let me understand." Peter's voice sounded distinctly worried. "You told no one of what you had done? Not even Margot? Margot is very sympathetic and full of understanding. She would have been able to advise you. Why didn't you take her into your confidence? You are so young to do things on your own initiative. You are just a child—a dear, impulsive, generous child."

"You don't know the family, Peter! Margot would never see any excuse in what I did. She is *terrible*. Why, she even pays for the postage stamps she borrows from any of us!"

Peter almost smiled, but for the gravity of the case under consideration. It was a question of ethics and he was trying to understand how Marigold had come by her point of view—what specious reasoning could be employed in her defence in the matter of faking the necklace.

"In my place, Margot would have starved and gone in rags, while Mummy had the ropes of pearls put by for her wedding day," continued Marigold. "She and Megan have no sense of proportion. They exaggerate obligations *terribly*."

"Go on," said Peter, pressing her soft palm to his cheek to keep in close touch with the magnetism of her that hypnotised his judgment and left him helpless.

"There was a terrible scene last night when I was dropped home by you. Megan and Margot were both waiting up for me, and Megan told me that I was a common thief, and that she would call up the police and all, unless I made a clean breast of what had happened. Knowing how mad she can be, and terrified to think what she would do, I just had to say what I had done, and oh . . ."

Marigold dissolved into tears again, in memory of her agonised ordeal.

This time Peter did not help her out, but continued absently to fondle her hand which lay against his cheek,

while she related all that had occurred. If she could have seen his eyes, she would have noticed that they looked dark and fearful. A deep anxiety brooded there. But she did not see them, and continued her story sobbingly.

"I—I haven't told the worst yet," said she. "Wait till you hear the *dreadful* thing that happened. Megan made me go to-day to get the money back from Mr. Timpson, but—*Peter!*—he has gone away with it!" Her voice rose in an emotional crescendo. "He wasn't a millionaire at all! He is only a crook passing for a gentleman, and they told me at the club that he wasn't even a member, but only the friend of a member who is a Russian, and that Mr. Timpson has gone to Moscow. He has robbed me of that money, for he left no address, and though he promised to write and let me know how he had invested the money, he never did so, at all. He has just—disappeared."

"Good God!" dropped from Peter, though the embezzlement was of secondary importance to the matter of faking the pearls, and other risks she had run.

"Isn't it a calamity? All that money which would have meant so much to me—*us*—and stolen—stolen!"

"I'm not sorry," said Peter, peculiarly.

"What do you mean, Peter? How can you be so calm about it?"

"I should have hated to touch that money, Marigold. Perhaps you haven't realised what you have done. But if you think it out, you will see that Megan and Margot are right, and that you did wrong to have deceived your mother in that way—the faked necklace and all—the whole idea—I can't go into it—but we don't do that sort of thing. You are such a baby," he smiled unnaturally and her hand slipped out of his and fell into her lap unnoticed by him, while he tried to explain what should have needed no explanation. And while he talked gently and diffidently, Marigold's face fell and her lips trembled piteously. Her beauty altogether disarmed him. He sat beside her on his settee, his arm about her shoulders trying to make the best of a bad case, for she was the dearest thing on earth to him, and all he said was as much to

convince himself of her innocence, as to absolve her from the slur of dishonesty. "You did not understand—You did not realise—You are so inexperienced—Of course, it never occurred to you"—and so forth and so on, while he made himself pity her childish mind and love her simplicity. It was very sweet and honest of her to come straight to him in her trouble, and for that he meant to stand by her, wisely or unwisely. She needed him. Poor little soul. In good hands she would have her eyes opened to many things she was at present blinded to by her faulty upbringing.

It was a dreadful thing for her to do—having those pearls faked so carefully, even to the transfer of the clasp! But did she realise that it was dreadful? So much was in *wilful* wrong-doing. The intention to cheat. It was not that she thought of cheating her mother, but of avoiding 'a fuss'. Megan bullied her in that house, and fear begat cowardice, and cowardice all other moral lapses. Everyone was to blame, but his beloved girl.

How still she was as she listened, making him feel such a prig, such a brute to be pointing out, however considerately, the degradation it was to stoop to deception and acts that the world branded as dishonest.

"You don't love me!" she pouted reproachfully.

"I adore you—I worship you!"

"Then how can you talk to me so?"

She did not understand! so he kissed her and tried to forget everything but how sweet she was, how clinging and lovely. And she was his own—promised to him. This other matter was all a mistake and the outcome of her thoughtlessness and desire to avoid a scene.

"Will you marry me?" he asked, to prove how much she meant to him. "Will you let me take care of you always?"

"But that money!" she cried, regretfully. "It would have been such a windfall!

"Damn the money!" Peter hated to think of it. "You would never have touched it without your mother's permission and forgiveness, and even then—Oh, don't let us think of it!"

"But I have to think of it. Megan has got to hear that it has gone—gone! and she will punish me. She has said dreadful things. I dare not go home and face her."

"We'll go together," said he. "Face her with the truth and say how terribly sick you feel about it, for, of course, you do. It is only natural, once you have seen it from the right angle. I'll stand by you, and then we'll tell them that we are going to be married, so they'll bury the hatchet and wipe out the whole damn thing."

"Oh, Peter! What would I do without you? You are such a darling. Only you understand me. Nobody else does. But isn't it shocking that this man should get off scot-free with all that money? It would have been so useful to—us." She kept harping on the subject.

"Even if we got it back it would belong to your mother—not you, unless she chose you to have it, so don't think of it. I'll see what can be done to trace this crook, but if he has gone to Moscow, I fear it will be hopeless, for he may be passing under another name out of England. Such a man would be careful to cover up his tracks."

As the hour was close upon one o'clock, Peter took her out to lunch, and she was so greatly cheered by his devotion that the smiles were restored to her face. She grew courageous and ceased to fear Megan. With Peter to defend her, Megan would not dare to carry out her threat, and nothing else mattered. She even comforted herself with the philosophy that she was no worse off than she was before she took the pearls to be valued. They had lain for years in her mother's jewel-box as a bauble, unused and forgotten. No one had thought of them in terms of money, so they had only to forget the episode, and nobody was any the worse. Of what use repining? Peter meant to take legal advice, and if anything could be done to trace and find the rogue calling himself "Mr. Timpson", that is, if it was possible to bring him to justice, it would be done without any effort on her own part.

As for Rolly Sherwell! Not for worlds would she tell him the story and let him have a laugh at her expense.



She disliked him thoroughly, and Megan was welcome to have him back if she liked.

When at last Peter drove her home to Kremlin Crescent, her attitude was one of injured innocence, and it was difficult to tell if his efforts to impress her mind had not been a waste of time. He stifled a passing doubt concerning the question, but loyally supported her while she broke the news of the embezzlement to Megan in his presence. Mr. Timpson was a fraud, the two thousand pounds had vanished like smoke, and it was doubtful if they could ever trace him or bring him to justice. Peter suffered acutely during the recital, filled with embarrassment and shame, as if he, and not Marigold, was to blame. And Megan's face was a study in repression. What she thought or felt, Peter could not guess, but there was no threat of condign punishment for the youthful offender who overacted her independence in the face of the gravity of her offence, but whom he had not the heart to condemn.

"Don't be angry with her, Megan," said Peter. "She's only a kid. One has to make allowances."

"You are very generous to her, Peter."

"I think I understand her best."

"I am glad you think you do. Long may she justify your confidence in her. It is difficult for me to make allowances for acts that are, to my mind, inexcusable."

"I love her, Megan, and she has promised to be my wife," he said, speaking with frankness and sincerity. "I want to feel that this is the happiest day in my life, so far, so please be generous, yourself, and don't refer to this business again, for anything that distresses Marigold must affect me deeply."

Megan softened, but still rode her high horse magnificently.

"Peter—I would like to forget this if I can. It is too painful a subject for me to wish to refer to again. It has been an eye-opener, believe me, and has filled me with great uneasiness. However, I hope Marigold appreciates the full extent of her dishonourable conduct and will take the lesson to heart. I have no more to say. My mother knows nothing—nor does Mignonette. It was too serious

for me to speak of it, so I have made excuses and returned the pearls to remain as a wedding present for Marigold from Mummy. It would break Mummy's heart if she knew the truth."

"Don't be hard on Marigold," was Peter's one plea.

## CHAPTER XII

### ACTIONS AND REACTIONS

It was quite settled, and Marigold wore a ring on the third finger of her left hand to tell the world that she was beloved of a Man and pledged to marry him.

The ring did not come up to her expectations, for it was a simple thing of platinum and small diamonds, but one could not have everything, and having Peter as one's exclusive property made up for many a lack. Marigold revelled in the liberty to demonstrate affection, and rejoiced in her unquestioned sway. That anyone so big and good to look at should be like wax in her hands, was a triumph any girl would be proud to have achieved. She carried herself with greater assurance than ever, and seemed a very happy and contented girl. Megan left her severely alone, saying little to her that was not necessary in the give-and-take of family life, and Min openly envied her with all her covetous soul. As for Margot, she took the lovers to her heart, and glowed with thrills and vicarious emotions she never admitted even to herself, while watching the progress of the wonderful romance. It was only wonderful because Peter was the lover; for, to Margot, Peter was the only man in the world worth loving, heart and soul.

Min's thirst for denials of the courtship was unquenchable; but, to her mind, Peter might have been more generous in the matter of an engagement ring. She expressed herself freely on the subject when they were at breakfast, the morning she and Mrs. Cowen were leaving

for Moreton Gadsby, and Marigold did not say much in Peter's defence, only turned the little ring about this way and that, to sparkle in the morning light.

"I think it a very pretty ring," said Margot. "Very uncommon in its setting, and the diamonds are good."

"It couldn't have cost more than ten to twenty pounds," said Marigold. "I saw one like it in the Eastern Gem Company's window, and ever since feel out of conceit with it. Imitations are a ghastly nuisance."

Megan murmured under her breath something that sounded like: "You should be the last to refer to imitations," and Min remarked that she would rather not have any ring than one that could be mistaken for a fake.

"I can't suggest to Peter that he should change it for one more expensive, can I?" asked Marigold, testily. "One mustn't look a gift-horse in the mouth."

"I should imagine you would be proud of anything he gave you," said Margot, hurrying to be off to work. "What's in the cost of an engagement ring? It is only a symbol; something to mark a promise. Really, Marigold, you make me sick."

"I am not complaining, am I?" asked Marigold, with her mouth full of toast.

"No, but you don't look enthusiastic."

"Because I am *honest* enough not to pretend what I don't feel."

Again Megan murmured something respecting the irony of the word in Marigold's mouth.

"Marigold and I both feel that an engagement ring should be distinctive, and a poor one only looks mean."

"Peter is anything but mean!" cried Margot. "He has given Marigold heaps of wonderful presents when he can't afford much. It would be rank folly for him to spend a heap of money on just a ring when, presently, he'll have to pay her passage to India and all that setting up house out there will amount to. He's having hard times, and you don't seem to have any comprehension of the need for economy."

"Oh, shut up!" cried Marigold. "I don't need you

to stand up for Peter. I'm going to marry him, and that's enough."

"What a treasure he will have in a wife!" grinned Min.

"Don't be rude!"

"Well, it's the truth, isn't it? He thinks you perfectly wonderful to make all your own undies so elaborately—though, poor dear, he really doesn't know which way to look when you bring them out to show them off. It was a brainwave that made you furnish a bottom-drawer all these months! But I am just wondering how you are going to get all the frocks and hats and out-door coats, silk stockings—and linen! My, it's enough to make Megan depressed, believe me!"

"Don't worry," said Megan, "I'm not troubling. You can't wring blood out of stone, and I'm certainly not providing Marigold's trousseau—or giving her any linen."

"But the bride's parents always provide linen," said Marigold.

"They may. Your dear father isn't living and Mummy has enough to do to provide herself with the ordinary needs of life," said Megan.

"Me, too," interjected Min.

"So you'll have to do without a trousseau unless you sell your remaining trinkets."

"I haven't any left worth selling."

"Then I'm sorry for you," said Megan, insincerely.

"Oh, I guess Peter will give you a cheque when he realises the circumstances," from Min.

"Wait till you are married before taking Peter's cheques," said Margot, rushing away.

"I guess I'll have to take all I can get if I must have a trousseau," Marigold said, sullenly.

"What a mercy you are going to the jungles in Malaya, where you won't need pretty frocks, and where any of your old things will do," said Min, provocatively. "If the worst comes to the worst you can wear *Khudda*, or whatever that Ghandi-stuff is they manufacture locally. What a saving for Peter!"

"Oh, get out!" screamed Marigold furiously, and got out herself, being unable to bear any more.

Mrs. Cowen comforted her with vague hopes concerning a future no one could foresee, for you never could tell 'what a day might bring forth', which meant that if she happened to marry again she would make it up to her poor, darling girl to whom Fate was so unkind. To think of a wedding without a ceremonial and no trousseau, was too humiliating for words.

She, herself, was greatly satisfied with her own trousseau which had been provided out of her jewel-case, and her eyes shone at the prospect of beginning a new life with renewed health and strength to enjoy it. After all, health was the main thing, and health was largely influenced, she had been led to believe, by the condition of the mind. Now that she saw the futility of giving in to her depression and that, by making an effort, she could actually get about without collapsing, she had great hopes of enjoying her visit to her friend in Essex.

"Has the car arrived?" she asked, excitedly, as she put the finishing touches to her toilet before the mirror.

"Not yet," said Marigold.

"Put away my comb, darling, and see if Megan has strapped my trunks. Dear me! where is my vanity-bag? Oh, thanks. I suppose you will be out every day having a lovely time with Peter. He's such a dear, and you are a very lucky girl. It is such a pity he hasn't money."

"It is," echoed Marigold, speaking to sympathetic ears. "It's the one fly in the ointment, for it will be years before he can afford to come home again. Passages cost money, and when every penny counts in bad times, when he can't even afford to keep two assistants, it isn't likely we'll be able to come home in a hurry."

"But he'll surely let you come without him? One passage is not so expensive as two, and Peter is anything but selfish. Most wives, whose husbands work in the East, come home without them. Why not you?"

"I dare say it will have to be done in the end, for it is to be seen how the climate will suit me. Or I may not like it. He is, himself, worried about how it will agree with my health. But he says he doesn't know how he

could ever get along without me. I suppose they all feel like that, but have to get over it."

"It is the curse of India, and places like India. But one must not begin crossing bridges before we come to them, for 'sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof'. He loves you very much."

"Oh yes. Tremendously. It almost frightens me, for he persists in putting me on a pedestal to worship, and it will be rather trying to live up to his ideals, poor dear!"

"Naughty girl!" Mrs. Cowen smiled while powdering her nose. "See if the car is at the door."

Marigold looked out of the window and said the car had not arrived. "Peter is going north just before Christmas, instead of after!"

"Dear me! Shouldn't he put it off, seeing that you are just engaged?"

"It's on business to do with rubber contracts. I said it's going to be rotten for me. But he promised to be back so we can spend Christmas with Kit. Not very exciting, is it? for Kit doesn't like me, and is only putting up with me for his sake. However, I can't make trouble."

"One thing you'll have to guard against in married life is letting your husband have things all his own way. Your Daddy was like that, and I had awful times making him see reason. A wife has to be considered, and if you don't begin making your husband consider you from the first, it can't be done later. After all, a girl gives herself to a man, and the least he can do is to make her happy in her own way, not his."

"I mean to see to that," said Marigold. "But I'm not married yet," remembering her attempt to prevent Peter from going to Scotland, and the scene she brought about the previous day with tears and rebellion, all to no purpose. Peter's real distress did not interfere with his determination to do what he thought was for their common good. She began to see that streak in Peter so like Kit, that Megan had already noticed. If anything had to be done, no power on earth would make him shirk it. He could be exceedingly tender, but very determined and rigid on certain points.

"Can't you see, sweetheart, that it is of the first importance to business and our future prosperity that I should see this firm up north and be able to secure the contract before others get ahead of me? I hate leaving you and will miss you like nothing on earth, but——"

"What am I to do without you? It will be so wretchedly dull and miserable! Don't complain if I go out with anyone who asks me."

"Of course not! You must enjoy yourself. I can trust you, for if you love me, no one else will be of any use to you."

"I might as well make the most of London," she had replied. "When I am in Malaya, I'll have to do without things, and I am bound to be homesick." This hurt, she knew, by the pain in his eyes; but she was in the mood to hurt him, and continued. "Besides, I have such heaps of friends in London who are going to miss me, so it is just as well to have a last fling." If that frightened him, all the better!

As a matter of fact, for a moment it had shocked him. But Peter said nothing in reply, and had held her close and lovingly to him, refusing to take her words seriously, and making all the allowances possible, because she was 'such a kid'. Only nineteen! What did she know of 'flings' that she should abuse his confidence in her? She had given herself into his keeping, and unless she truly cared, this wonderful thing could not have come to pass.

They had parted affectionately, and Marigold felt unable to settle down to anything, having learned to be dependent on Peter for all the excitement her engagement had brought into her life.

At last the car arrived and Megan assisted her mother to enter it, Min bundled in after her with miscellaneous packages and parcels, and they were driven away, feeling like old times in a new model of a magnificent Bentley, and no one more thrilled than Mrs. Cowen, who was fast forgetting to consider her nerves.

Megan, who was never happy in Marigold's society, retired to her kitchen jobs with Mrs. Grabbitt to assist her, and Marigold passed the time glancing through

impassioned letters from her many admirers that kept alive a profound belief in herself.

The most recent of all had arrived by the last post the previous day, and was from a young man signing himself 'Bobby', whose recklessness greatly flattered her vanity. If she had shown these letters, and this one in particular, to Peter, there would certainly have been trouble, for it was inconceivable that she would have been permitted to meet 'Bobby' again. And explanations would certainly have involved her in a tangle of lies.

*Darling,* wrote Bobby.

*I shall not believe this rumour of your engagement unless you yourself tell me so. I cannot think that you would deliberately play me false, specially after being so wonderful to me. You know how I adore you. How I would die for you. That life is utterly worthless to me if you kill all my hope that we shall one day be man and wife. How could you be so false? Not you, with your angel face and loving ways. I have been in heaven for months past. You have been my guiding star, my goal. I dream of you, waking and sleeping. You entirely fill my horizon. All I do is for you. Every effort to succeed and gain advancement in the firm, is with the hope of winning you. Your promise, made that night of nights when we returned from the Armistice Ball at the Albert Hall, stands good, and I shall soon be in a position to claim its fulfilment, for they are pleased with me at the office and I have had a hint that I shall have a rise in the New Year. Lovely Marigold! Precious girl, in imagination I kiss your sweet mouth. I hold your divine loveliness in my arms once more and plead with you to meet me to-morrow somewhere, anywhere you name, that I may be reassured that gossip has lied. You are still all my own. I dare not doubt it, or life would have no object for me. I might just as well quit.*

*Your distracted and devoted lover,*

*Bobby.*

Marigold flushed and thrilled a little as she always did when stirred with the echo of passions she had thoughtlessly awakened in men. She recalled many occasions in



the past when this 'Bobby' had swept her off her feet with his eager wooing, infecting her with some of the emotions rioting in him. She had certainly been carried away and foolish to have allowed him to believe her in earnest, for she had never really intended to marry Bobby, who was a great awkward boy whom she had played with in schooldays and fooled to the top of her bent. He had been useful to practise her arts upon, but she had never meant him to fall so desperately in love with her. In moments of idleness and boredom she had amused herself with him. He had been allowed to spend all his small earnings on treating her to plays and dances, and had been set aside and put off with innumerable excuses and lies when anyone more attractive had offered better times. She was not to blame for Bobby's folly, for he was quite old enough to know how to look after himself and realise that they had only been flirting. Flirting was half the fun in life, and was never taken seriously.

She read and re-read Bobby's letter and finally decided that she would meet him the following evening after saying good-bye to Peter, who was catching the night express. She had promised to see him off and return home by taxi, so as to ease his mind with regard to her safety; but it would be Bobby who could see her home instead, after they had had a talk somewhere.

It was time she explained things to him, and put an end to these foolish letters—poor dear! Bobby wasn't a bad sort, but she never would have married him, as she wanted a MAN, not a sentimental, weak-willed boy whom she could wipe her shoes upon at all times, and who sickened her with his abject devotion. Peter was devoted, but she was always a little afraid of Peter's experience of life and strength of character. Peter made a halo round her and credited her with more than she possessed of moral rectitude. He had a touching faith in her sprouting wings some day, when she awakened to life and its obligations, and persisted in regarding her as a fledgling, not as yet responsible for her acts. But she had a feeling that there were limits to Peter's faith and toleration. He was capable of awakening to disillusionment, and if ever she

disillusioned him, his faith and his trust would vanish, possibly taking his love with them—and then, the deluge! For Marigold knew that she loved Peter as much as it was in her to love any man, and that it was only because she could not give him up that she was going to face conditions in Malaya which filled her with misgivings.

She loved Peter, though she was tempted to try him sorely. She was happiest with him, and reached the highest peak of emotional excitement and bliss whenever he made love to her in his restrained but fascinating way. Peter's kisses, full of tender respect, magnetised her for reasons impossible for her to explain. She weakened in his arms to the point of complete surrender, had he known it, though at all times she knew her honour was as safe with him as if she were in reality on a pedestal and he a worshipper at her shrine.

Therefore, she meant to marry Peter and no other, and think afterwards of her Malayan problem. They were to be married a month before his holiday ended, and after a honeymoon spent in Paris were to sail for the Malayan peninsular.

In the meantime, however, she saw no harm in playing with fire so long as she did not allow it to burn her. It was not possible to one of her temperament and habits to sit quiet and wait patiently for her *fiancé* to return from Scotland and resume his worship of her. She had no resources in herself, as she rarely read books, instructive or entertaining, had no accomplishments to occupy her time, and could not attach herself to needlework for more than a portion of the day. Since Bobby had suggested their meeting, she saw no harm in arranging it so as to make him understand her position. She did not want to hurt the poor, dear boy more than was necessary, but he must give up writing her such impassioned letters and accept the inevitable cheerfully. Indeed, Marigold argued herself into believing that it was her bounden duty to accord him this meeting, that he might be convinced of the futility of pestering her with communications like the last.

Accordingly, she wrote a little note and posted it across

the road in the pillar-box at the corner, and decided that it was quite unnecessary to tell Peter anything about this engagement, following his departure for the north. She was rather pleased with the way she had worded her letter to Bobby, for it was both tactful and considerate, and yet did not unnecessarily lead him to expect that he was not going to have things his own way. The real difficulty had been in addressing him. To have been very formal would have been too utterly painful and cruel; so she wrote as usual, leaving things to shape themselves on their meeting.

*Dearest Bobby, she had said.*

*You are very foolish, and I am going to scold you when we meet, which will be to-morrow evening at King's Cross, as I shall be seeing somebody off to Scotland, and will wait for you, when the train has gone, at the entrance to the Booking Office.*

*Yours ever,*

*Marigold.*

Peter called to take her to luncheon, and she was able to forget Bobby in the distraction of a shopping expedition in the afternoon, during which she was commanded by her future husband to choose a Christmas present for herself, one for her mother, and one each for her sisters.

Marigold had no difficulty in choosing her own present up to the sum Peter cautiously specified, since he had only a limited amount at his disposal for such a purpose, and was in raptures over a contribution to her trousseau. Silken hose, gossamer *lingerie* ornamented with lace of cob-web texture, and a gorgeous satin kimono made in China.

She, however, revolted at having to buy any presents for the family, particularly Megan, against whom she still nursed feelings of resentment, and as she could not give one without giving all gifts at Christmas time, she stubbornly refused to give any.

"But at Christmas all grievances are buried," urged Peter, gently. "A case of 'peace and goodwill toward men', and no grudges."

"I can't help it," said she. "I can't be a hypocrite, and I won't spend money on Megan, or let you."

"I feel that we'd be the happier for it. Margot is a real sport, and has been more like your own sister," he urged.

"I'm afraid I haven't any use for my relations. They have all been jealous of me, and have never given me credit for a decent act. It is just that Margot is away from home all day that we get on at all, or she, too, would be having a down on me."

"Frankly," persisted Peter, "I would like to give them all something."

"You can, if you want to annoy me," she pouted, refusing to let him touch her. "Do what you like, but you can't expect me to feel pleased. I think you might consider me before you think of them, and if you really care for me, there would be nothing more said. You know how I was insulted only lately—insulted and threatened—and yet—oh, how can you go against me like this, Peter!"

It took some time for Peter to make his peace, Marigold having worked up her feelings to the point of tears, but at length a truce was declared, and a compromise made, which permitted Peter to buy a large box of chocolates as his Christmas present to the family, and Marigold was to hold it over till her mother and Min returned from their holiday, and even offer the contents for general consumption.

It was all sheer childishness, Peter told himself, and made allowances accordingly. A few years hence, Marigold, herself, would be ashamed to behave like this. She had to grow up, and time worked wonders. It made no difference to his love how childish or unreasonable she was in small things, for people had combined to spoil her with petting and adulation, and it was unjust to blame her. In course of time she would outgrow these minor faults, and make a wonderful wife. How dear and affectionate she was! How intensely sensitive and loving! So he left for Scotland that evening, with Marigold to wave to him from the platform, and his heart full of adoration and longing. The trip to Scotland was a nuisance, but it would soon be over.

Not a moment longer than was necessary would he stay, and then he would be with his darling girl again—he hoped in time for Christmas Day, which he and she were to spend with Kit at Hove.

Kit was deeply disappointed in his choice, having, as Peter believed, been biased by Megan against Marigold, and therefore ready to believe the poor little kid vain, shallow, and selfish. Peter smiled to think how little women understood women, and resolved to make it his business to convert Kit as speedily as possible to an appreciation of Marigold's sweet, pliant nature, and real worth.

## CHAPTER XIII

### CHRISTMAS

PETER's visit to his friend in Scotland was unexpectedly prolonged, as he was taken severely ill with influenza, so that it was a week before he was able to return. Thus, Christmas came and went, and Marigold, left to her own resources, suffered Bobby to entertain her, and keep her from feeling bored.

When Margot, who saw him frequently on the doorstep or waiting in the sitting-room to take Marigold out, remonstrated, she was told to mind her own business. "Peter knows, and if he doesn't mind, why should anyone interfere?"

"If Peter knows, then, of course, it is nothing to me."

"Peter is only too glad to think that I am having a little diversion. He isn't dog-in-the-manger, and knows that I am likely to mope to death unless I do something. Where is the harm?"

"If you say there is no harm, I'll take your word for it." And Margot said no more, but could not understand how Marigold cared to be out every day enjoying herself while Peter lay ill with 'flu and chest complications, so far away. She herself would have flown, if

not literally, by rail, as fast as steam could take her to Edinburgh, that she might satisfy herself as to whether he was being properly nursed. However, Marigold had no courage or initiative to go any distance alone, and, instead, sought distraction in ways congenial to herself.

Christmas at Kremlin Crescent was unlike all previous Christmas celebrations, for the quiet of Sunday prevailed. As the family had separated, Megan refused to spend money on a turkey, and marked the event with a chicken instead, and a pound of cooked ham as a treat. Chicken was a luxury at the flat, and such adjuncts as stuffing and bread sauce being beyond her experience to contrive, Mrs. Grabbitt 'obliged' for half the day, and the cookery lesson was useful.

The day dawned mild and rainy.

"Anybody going to church?" asked Margot, feeling incapable of rising early, and wanting moral support in the matter of shirking.

"I am," Megan replied, forcing herself to get up. "I can't manage the later service, there's so much to be done, and it's now or never. A Merry Christmas to you," and reaching over she kissed Margot on the cheek—an annual habit.

"Communion?" asked Margot, after returning the wish and salute.

"Of course. It's the right thing to do, isn't it?" Megan was nothing if not orthodox.

"Marigold going?"

"I know nothing about Marigold and don't care to."

Margot yawned and stretched, wishing her conscience would allow her to turn over and go to sleep again. "You can't take communion in that spirit," she remarked. "You have to be at peace with your enemies, or it is 'damnation to your soul'."

Megan grunted. Nevertheless, after she had bathed, she put her head in at Marigold's door and said awkwardly: "A Merry Christmas." This particular formula could not be neglected if the proper spirit for communion must be cultivated.

"Same to you," came from under the bedclothes.

"Are you going to church?"

"What *now*? I was terribly late getting to bed. No—I'll go later."

A milk-cart trundled down the road with a rattle of bottles and cans, and Megan went shivering to clothe herself, having done what she considered her 'duty to her neighbour'.

Marigold slept till luncheon, which was dinner to the family, and complained of having overslept herself. "I would have gone to church at eleven if anyone had called me, but it was so quiet that I knew nothing till midday."

Megan shrugged her shoulders.

"How is Peter?" asked Margot, for there was a letter from him on Marigold's plate, along with stacks of Christmas cards, and Margot ached to know how far he had progressed on the road to recovery. Marigold, however, was in no hurry to read it as she preferred to enjoy Peter's letter in private, and refused to be rushed. "I suppose he's all right," she replied.

"I don't know how you can sit there and feed while a letter from Peter, who has been so ill, lies unopened." Which was very interfering of Margot, and resented accordingly by Marigold.

"I'm not going to read his letter to satisfy you. It seems that you are extraordinarily interested."

"It's extraordinary that you are not!"

"Just leave me to mind my own business and mind yours. I won't be criticised and hectored at every turn by my stepsisters. Thank God, I shall be out of this very soon!"

Margot was incensed by Marigold's ingratitude when the instalments for the opera cloak were still being paid at great sacrifice to herself, so it might be her excuse for the row that followed, which was one of the worst on record, with Megan as a prejudiced umpire. A great many regrettable accusations were made on both sides, and much temper lost. Self-control was difficult under the circumstances and it was all Megan could do to prevent the combatants from coming to blows.

"You forget it's Christmas Day. Stop fighting. If

they hear you upstairs, what are they to think!"—from Megan, whose eyes shot hatred at Marigold.

"You are both a pair of hypocrites, going to church and taking communion and then going for me like this."

"It's your fault for goading me to say things."

"You think because I owe you a paltry sum of money that I must for ever be under your heel. I'll return that the moment I'm married."

"If Peter only knew of your doings he'd think twice before he married you," said Megan.

"God help Peter when he's married to you!" said Margot, in all sincerity. "Does he know that you are out every night with Bobby Slack, and that you are often home past midnight? *That*, for an engaged girl——"

"Peter trusts me——"

"More fool he," put in Megan.

"Swear that you aren't flirting with Bobby? I think I could say something that would astonish you, for I saw you come home last night."

If Margot was trying to bluff Marigold into an admission, it succeeded beyond her expectations. It happened that she had risen to close a bumping shutter in the living-room after midnight, when she saw Marigold arrive with a man, whom she recognised in the moonlight as Bobby, and who seemed to be deeply agitated and upset by some argument that was taking place between them. As they passed into the black shadow of the house, Bobby seized both her hands, and Margot fled to her bed with feelings of great bitterness. Poor Peter!

"You were spying!" cried Marigold, furiously.

"I was justified."

"What did you see?" childishly incriminating herself.

"Peter will be interested to know."

"It is disgraceful!" cried Megan. "If you are still carrying on with that poor boy while you are talking of marrying Peter, you deserve that anything should happen."

"I did nothing, nothing! I was only explaining that he was not to trouble me any more. I told him that Peter was returning soon, and that I would not be going out with him again."



"Yet you had been going out with him all the week," challenged Megan.

"He would insist——"

"And you were only too glad to comply—raising false hopes and being disloyal to Peter——"

"I wasn't! I did my best——"

"You never did—I'll wager," cried Margot, angrily. "You weren't honest enough to send him about his business straight away from the moment you engaged yourself to Peter, but had to keep him dangling to feed your colossal vanity, taking all you could out of him for your own pleasure and entertainment, knowing all the time that what was fun to you was deadly earnestness to him. Possibly, you allowed him to make love to you just to pass the time. Oh, you are a wicked flirt! Without heart or conscience, and will yet be responsible for a tragedy; only I hope to God it won't be Peter whose life you will wreck."

In the midst of the row there was an imperative knock on the front door of the flat, which Megan went to answer, little dreaming of the startling support to Margot's indictment awaiting them on the mat. In the meantime the argument continued, hammer and tongs, in the seclusion of the kitchen, till interrupted by Megan's face in the doorway, looking as colourless as chalk as she beckoned Margot out.

"Something dreadful has happened!" Megan said, appalled.

"What is it?" in scared tones. Margot's thought immediately flew to Peter.

"Bobby's mother is here—he's—*dead*, and she's mad—mad with Marigold. You had better send her along."

"But how—when—did it happen?"

"She found it out this morning. He turned on the gas-tap . . . there'll be an inquest, sure. How too dreadful! And it will all come out in the newspaper. She has a letter he shoved under her door, which she found when she got up; and she is of two minds whether or not to hand it over to the police. It's ghastly! Oh, Marigold deserves anything—anything! I hope Peter will teach her a lesson."

"You've got to tell Marigold."

"Mrs. Slack is waiting—but—what can Marigold do? Yet—she must face the result of her mischief."

"How awful! Such a thing would kill me."

"I hope it will go right home to her."

"How will she bear it? Whatever she is, she never meant to do him any harm. She could not have dreamt that he would be so insane as to——"

"Go and tell her. I can't."

"Tell her yourself. I can't bear to think of her feelings."

"I'm not going to say a word to her, for I know I shall want to beat her, the little beast!"

Megan looked fit to carry out her inclinations, so Margot returned to the kitchen and broke the dreadful news to Marigold.

A shriek from Marigold was the answer. "It's not true! It can't be true! You are saying it to try me. You and Megan are devils, and I hate you!"

"Mrs. Slack is waiting for you in the sitting-room. She is determined to see you. The police are at her house; there will be a coroner's inquest. Mrs. Slack has a letter to show you, and won't go till she has said what she came to say."

"I can't see her; I won't see her!" cried Marigold in a panic, for the very words 'coroner's inquest' struck terror to her soul.

"You'll have to see her, for she can be very vindictive, and naturally feels you are responsible. You must say something. Try to defend yourself; whether it is true or not, you are the judge of that. But I'll come with you and see you through, as Peter would wish it, I know." She was ready to do anything for Peter's sake, however much it went against the grain. All her anger against Marigold for her past misbehaviour was stifled in the great need to save Peter from shock, disillusionment and suffering.

Marigold was weeping helplessly, her defence having again collapsed under the weight of the evidence against her. "I never knew he would do such a thing. When he said he would, I told him not to be foolish; but he swore, and, my God! he has gone and done it! Bobby! Oh,

Bobby! how was I to know he was so mad as to take what I said so seriously?"

"What did you do all the week when you went about with him, but make matters worse for him? You must have allowed him to hope?"

"If he did, how could I help it?"

"Did you actually allow him to make love to you?"

"I couldn't stop him, he was so miserable. I had to let him down gently. I was frightened by his desperation. I had to be kind, and—and not repulse him too harshly. But when we came home, I told him it was all over. I told him that I loved Peter and no one else. I said I would never marry any other man, and that I did not mean to go out with him any more, for it only made it more difficult for him in the end. And then I came in, and he went home. How was I to dream . . ." And Marigold sobbed in panic.

"Come along. Don't waste time," said Margot, taking her by the arm.

But Marigold struggled and hung back. "I can't bear it. For God's sake, don't tell Peter! Everyone has a down on me—even Fate!"

"Peter is bound to know presently, and if he can forgive you he's one of God's angels."

"Oh, what am I to do?" wailed Marigold. "I can't see Bobby's mother!"

"She expects to see you. She is very much upset, and very much to be pitied. Do what you can to console her. Come." Margot linked an arm into Marigold's and led her, limp and spineless, with eyes streaming, into the visitor's presence, for her to collapse into a chair and weep noisily.

"I want her to read this letter," said Mrs. Slack, in a harsh voice, her face like ashes, her features frozen. "Read it, both of you"—as it was obvious that Marigold was in no state to read anything at the moment.

So Margot read Bobby's little note and passed the letter on to Megan. It was the most pathetic thing in the world, and tears rained from her eyes. After some moments Marigold was prevailed upon to read it too.

*Mother darling,*

*It's cowardly, I know, to take this way out, but I can't stick it any more. Life is a muddle, and I've made a mess of mine, so it's best to quit.*

*You've been the dearest of mothers—what can I say that will comfort you? There is no comfort except in death. Let us hope that the next world will compensate for the sorrows of this. Pray for me as you have always done, for the prayers of a good mother may avail, and God will forgive my act.*

*Don't blame my beautiful Marigold. Perhaps she does not understand.*

*Pity and forgive me.*

*Bobby.*

Megan and Margot carried Marigold between them to her bedroom and put her into bed. Margot applied smelling-salts to her nostrils, for she looked faint and an object of pity.

Mrs. Slack was leaving when she returned to the sitting-room. "Perhaps she never understood the extent of the mischief she was doing. Or his nature." Mrs. Slack herself was now in tears, her face distorted, and her voice almost inarticulate. "The misfortune of it is, they all spoilt her—so many flattered her with their adoration. She did not understand—I see it now. My poor darling should have faced his disappointment. No girl is worth all that, however beautiful. But he lost his head—he was not himself."

"I am very sorry for you," said Margot, embracing Mrs. Slack sympathetically. "Marigold will remember this all her life. It will haunt her to her death." It was what Margot herself felt would happen were she in Marigold's place.

"I see no use in piling on the agony. My own heart is too sore, and I am wanted at home. But I had to come . . . only I did not expect Marigold would take it like this. It shows she must have had some feeling for my poor boy. Perhaps it was not her fault that he would not take 'no' for an answer. Tell her, when she is fit to listen, that I will suppress this letter and try to keep her name out

of the papers. It is enough that he has been greatly depressed of late. All can testify to that, and promotion has not been as rapid in his office as he had wished because of the state of trade. Oh, dear! This is a sad world, and I am a miserable woman to-day!" Her only son was dead and her hopes in life were shattered. But it was Christmas Day, and as a Christian she must live in 'peace and goodwill toward men'.

Margot waited beside her while Megan telephoned from the floor above for a taxi. When it arrived she directed the driver where to take the heart-broken lady for whom Christmas Day must always be the most painful in the calendar.

Megan afterwards took a walk through the damp and muddy streets as far away from the atmosphere of the flat as possible, and the sight of Marigold who, to her mind, was branded with the guilt of murder just as surely as if she had personally taken Bobby's life. Say what she may, she was to blame for raising his hopes and playing with his passion for the gratification of her own vanity, and it was nothing but just that she should be made to suffer the maximum of remorse for her act. It was a good sign that she seemed to be taking it to heart, but there was little enough of sincerity there, for the lesson to last.

Margot was not so implacable, and stood by in case she might be needed, though she, too, thought it best to leave Marigold to her suffering, as only through bitter regret and devastating sorrow could she rise out of her conceit and vanity and become fit to mate with Peter.

Megan did not return home till tea-time, and on her arrival found that Marigold had gone out and telegraphed to Peter to return immediately, as she was in dire trouble.

"She wanted me to take her telegram, but I refused," said Margot, with annoyance, "for she has no right to drag him to London from a sick-bed. Marigold has no consideration for anyone but herself. But what she wants is to give him her version of what has happened before he can get it from anyone else. I know her. She is incurable. Now she says that the letter she had this morning said he is better and feeling more himself."

Marigold's telegram brought Peter, by hired car, to London, much against his doctor's advice, and he arrived the next morning looking a ghost, though not otherwise the worse for exposure. "Risking pneumonia," said Margot. "No real urgency at all," said Megan.

"Where is Marigold?" he asked. "And what has happened?"

Marigold had put herself to bed after dispatching her telegram, and was on 'hunger strike', so that her pallor and the blue shadows under her eyes made her exquisitely pathetic, and Margot fancied she could imagine Peter's solicitude blinding him as to her culpability and making him believe anything she wished.

Megan explained, in the meantime, what had happened, and did her best not to sound prejudiced.

"A boy Marigold knew, and who has long wanted to marry her, has committed suicide. Naturally, she is upset about it, as his people think she's to blame."

"Would you like to go to her?" asked Margot, aware that it was what Peter was aching to do. "She will tell you all there is to know, so there's no use our saying anything."

"Better not," she told Megan, when Peter vanished in the direction of Marigold's room. "He will only think we are hard on her, for he's going to believe just what she means him to. And that's that."

"What fools men are," said Megan.

Margot caught sight of a letter just deposited on the door-mat by the postman, and finding it was from Min, to herself, was glad of the diversion it created. She read it and then re-read it to Megan, as it was characteristic, and gave them an idea of how things were with herself and the mother. Meanwhile, Peter remained at Marigold's bedside, assisting to restore the normal balance of her self-centred mind.

*My dear Margot (thus Min),*

*A Merry Xmas to you all. Mum says she'll write to-morrow, perhaps. I'm having the time of my life, and so is Mums. She is treated like a duchess and everyone makes*

a fuss of her, while I, as her lady-in-waiting, am enjoying her reflected glory. Everyone says she looks young enough to be my elder sister, and the moral effect has been to make the darling act up to it, so that she's bucking up tremendously and becoming quite optimistic in the society of the other sex. Christmas Eve we had a big dinner-party, and I did not know myself in that new frock of silver tissue and white georgette. I wore a big pink rose at my waist, and my ivory beads, and Mums said I looked every bit as nice as Marigold—only fatter. She wore her dove-grey satin with the old lace, and was a picture. A big, fat, elderly gentleman-farmer, who is a widower with grown-up children, all married, could not tear himself away from her. Mums looked so small next to him, and so pretty, that I could quite understand anyone going potty on her. She always manages to look so aristocratic, too, that poor Mrs. Legge, if she had only realised it, was like an old washerwoman beside her.

But the Legges know what's what, and their servants have evidently been used to entertaining, for the butler is quite awe-inspiring, and might be a gentleman, except when he speaks.

Mums manages to get about quite well now, and is becoming more and more independent, for I see to it that she doesn't depend too much on her Baby daughter. I had a riding lesson this morning. Flossie and I, with the Legge youth, rode out to see the hunt, and we enjoyed ourselves. As I used to ride, as a kid, I didn't do at all badly, and the Legge boy said I'll be quite a horsewoman yet. He's just through Sandhurst, and is waiting to be appointed. Pity he's got a squint, for he's going to have a big allowance from his father, as it is so impossible to live in the Army on Army pay. By the way, he's already keen on me, but there is nothing doing. I much prefer the society of Prince Oolookibeta, who is so interesting. He's rather black, with marvellous eyes like great, soft blobs of ink, and has hawklike features. He comes from Bengal, I believe, and is heir to vast estates as large as the whole of Ireland. Johnnie Legge says that his allowance is three thousand pounds a month, and oh, he has the most scrumptious car going—Italian, and very expensive. Though he dresses 'Savile Row', he wears a turban for distinction,

*and it's of the softest Indian silk, with a gold stripe in it : and the ring on his little finger makes one gasp. When his father, the Maharajah dies, he'll be wealthy beyond the dreams of avarice.*

*It seems, like the Rajah of Jungliwalla who married Lilian, he was at Cambridge with Johnnie, and he's not half a bad sort, for Johnnie says he often lends the fellows money if they are stuck. All the girls here are potty about him, for it is known that he has so far refused to marry in his own country, as he is fascinated by the girls over here.*

*I danced with him last night, and taught him the tango. You should have seen how jealous the others were. And to-morrow I am going to lunch with him in town, at the Indian Restaurant, to taste curry—there and back in his divine car. He talks in a queer accent, like Welsh, and looks at one in a mesmeric way that makes you feel all funny down your spine. He told me that English girls were the most beautiful in the world, the French the most clever, and the Americans most captivating. He means to marry in England and take his wife to India, where she will have an army of servants, and jewels enough to make her look like a Christmas tree, and she'd be the envied of her sex. He has lovely white teeth when he laughs, and he walks like a leopard. Really you should make his acquaintance, for I am sure you would say he's unique, and most attractive.*

*Mrs. Legge is feeling worried, for she has heard nothing from Lilian since she went out to India. But she thinks it is because she is having such a wonderful time with her in-laws that she simply can't settle down to letters.*

*Good-bye. I hope Marigold is pining for Peter and that absence will make the heart fonder, for Marigold loves no one so much as Number One.*

*Yours affectionately,*

*Min.*

*P.S.—I hope you got our Christmas cards all right?*



## CHAPTER XIV

## INJURED INNOCENCE

PETER's chivalrous soul was in arms against the injustice of Marigold's sisters in holding her responsible for the suicide of that unbalanced youth. As well might they blame her for the God-given loveliness which was hers and which attracted worshippers in spite of herself. To him, it was all so simple to understand: a girl-and-boy, sentimental friendship, outgrown on her side. The boy's persecution of her, and refusal to give up hope. When convinced that she loved another and would marry him and no other, he, like a coward, gassed himself! How dare they torment his beloved girl with reproaches and make her ill with their vindictive accusations? He was ready to tell them both what he thought of them, and was restrained only by Marigold's clinging to him and keeping him pinned to her side in her relief at his coming, the comfort and joy it was to have him seated beside her bed, demonstrating his great love for her with tender caresses.

"Never mind them! Now I have you, I am no longer afraid of anything!" she cried in an ecstasy of happiness. "Nothing matters so long as you believe in me, so long as you know that I am not to blame and that it isn't because I purposely encouraged him, then dashed his hopes, that it happened!"

"I couldn't think you so cruel, darling. Anyone who could act like that out of vanity and heartlessness would be beneath contempt. I should say she was as good as a murderess. How could anyone who knows *you* dare to be so unjust!"

"They have always been unjust to me. But promise you won't say anything. It will only make it all the harder for me to live with them till we are married. Don't let us think of anything but how much we love each other," she cooed, twining lovely soft arms round his neck.

There was something intoxicating in Marigold's caresses, the feel of her, the perfume of her. And it was more than thrilling to see that vacant space beside her, which was Min's, and to appreciate its suggestion in relation to their future. Very human longings were surging in Peter's breast as he caught her close and pressed fervent kisses on the pouting, red mouth.

He had never seen Marigold in such intimate surroundings, or so slightly clad, and was filled with reverential gratitude for the favour of the implication. Wasn't he her chosen husband, only waiting for the appointed day that he might possess her? Why should she be embarrassed or shy with him?

There was a dressing-gown on a chair at hand, but she had innocently rejected the necessity for any more covering than the quilt and dainty silken pyjamas afforded, with their sleeveless artistry and subtle suggestiveness which modern lingerie catered to express; and never had she looked more desirable. He was Samson to her Delilah, at her mercy, worshipful and adoring; believing altogether in her virtue and goodness, and ready to die, if need be, in defence of her.

After a few moments of ecstasy such as the meeting of lips may produce, there was a tap at the door, and Margot's voice asked if Peter would have refreshment. Perhaps Marigold had not remembered that he had come a long distance and been very ill.

The implied reproach drew from Peter a prompt refusal, and his voice sounded so formal and cold, that Margot was startled. It even preyed on her mind, and she suffered as if stabbed in the breast.

She went away and thought about it in feverish distress, saying nothing to Megan. It was a revelation to her how much she was capable of suffering if Peter was cold.

Foolish!—foolish! It was because she loved him. It was just that. She loved him, undesired—unsought. He had no eyes for her, no interest in her. Yet she loved him. Idiot! She abused her folly and called herself names. Not that she hoped for any return or dreamt that she was any more to him than Megan or Min. He was Marigold's

promised husband, and loved her—worshipped the ground under her feet. Thrice lucky Marigold!

But he had always been so kind—his very voice showing how kindly he felt towards her since that chance meeting in the crowd when she had impulsively stopped a thief from picking his pocket. She had since then seen a look of real friendship in his eyes, and had glowed with pleasure, admiration, loyalty. Why was he now so strange?

Marigold had said something—she had turned him against her.

Margot could not still the panic in her soul; for to be shut out from Peter's regard, even if it was only brotherly, was more than she could bear. She was willing to accept him as a brother if she could not have him as a lover. She could not endure that mischief should be made between them through Marigold.

She could not doubt that Marigold had made mischief, for he had not looked cold and unfriendly on his arrival a little while ago. Why should she suffer this change and not do something to clear the air—know what exactly had been said? Why should she not challenge an explanation? That was her way. Anything simmering below the surface was abominable and intolerable, and must at once be dug out, examined and explained away. If Peter had anything against her, she must know what it was, and without delay, or she would never sleep that night.

But how barge in on him when he was with Marigold, the two billing and cooing maddeningly?

Well, she would not interrupt them for long—only for a little while. She could say: "May I come in? I want to ask Peter something". And then she would ask him straight out what he had against her, for she had read it in his tones.

Here Megan put in her head, looking worried.

"What about giving Peter something to eat?"

"He has refused refreshment."

"Nonsense. He must be starved—and he doesn't look any too strong. Marigold, too, is fasting, for some reason known to herself. I don't believe she will last, and will be raiding the larder later on and finishing things I want

for dinner. I'll prepare something for them both, and you can take it in on a tray."

She retired to carry out her intention, leaving Margot with a solid argument for intruding on the lovers. She need not apologise if Megan had prepared food which she was requested to carry into Marigold's room.

In the meantime, Marigold had been reminded by Margot's inquiry to think of Peter's health, and she made up for her neglect by showing exquisite solicitude for his state. Had the journey tired him terribly? Was she wickedly selfish to have brought him away before he was quite rid of his weakness? 'Flu made people so weak, and he had risked so much to come to her! How adorable of him! Could she ever be grateful enough for such a lover!

Marigold was perfectly sincere at the moment in her feeling for Peter, and no one could have been more tender and loving than she in her anxiety for him, her genuine alarm lest he should have a relapse and die!

Peter had to laugh as he reassured her that he wasn't going to have a relapse, and that he would be all the better for having come. He was so glad to think she had wanted him, and, in any case, he would have come by train to-morrow.

"You must be starving," said she, drawing out a bar of chocolate from under her pillow. "Please have a piece." And Peter nibbled a piece of her chocolate to oblige her, and was not sorry to stop the pangs of hunger that were beginning to devour his vitals.

When Margot knocked again, it was for admission with the tray, and Marigold was only too glad to see the appetising dish of omelets and buttered toast, to refuse to be fed.

"There is a plate for Peter, too," said Margot, placing the tray on the bedside table. "I hope you will join Marigold, as you must be in need of food. Megan insists."

Peter stood, after making a brief acknowledgment, as if waiting for her to go, his face grim and unsmiling. Margot glanced at it, a lump like a knot in her throat; then, taking her courage in both hands, said:

"What is the matter? You look as if you had a grudge against me."

"How absurd, Margot!" put in Marigold uneasily. "What an idea!"

"I don't think I am mistaken. Peter—what's wrong?"

"I think it will do no harm for me to tell you, Margot, that whatever hurts Marigold hurts me. You and Megan have been desperately unfair and cruel to her over this miserable business, and said things we are neither of us likely to forget. I have nothing more to say. But I think it is as well you should know how this affects me."

The resentful gleam in his eyes, his coldness, the unfamiliar ring in his voice broke Margot's heart. From anyone else such undeserved censure would have been passed over as nothing; but from Peter it was not to be endured for a moment.

"Evidently Marigold has made her own story good. You would, of course, take all she says for gospel, and anything I say would fall on deaf ears."

"In loyalty to Marigold, I cannot discuss this matter. Please don't force me to say things better left unsaid."

"Peter!" she gasped. Then turning on Marigold she cried in honest rage and indignation: "You treacherous little liar! What have you told him, and what have you suppressed?"

"You hear, Peter? That's how I am treated"; and Marigold burst into tears, Peter going immediately to the rescue.

"That's enough!" said he, roughly. "Leave her alone. She won't be long with you. I'll fix things up at once and take her away."

Margot rushed from the room with a bursting heart. She had made matters worse, and Peter now hated the sight of her. All because she had no self-control, no common sense. She ought to have known that not even an angel from heaven could convince a man like Peter of Marigold's treachery. He was in love with her, and in his eyes she was faultless. That was the end of it, and they were now daggers drawn!

Deeply wounded and humiliated, Margot kept out of

the way and warned Megan to do the same. Marigold had scored, hands down, she said, and Peter was furious. He stood by her and was determined to hurry on the marriage so as to take her away. But all Megan said was that the sooner he did so the better.

Thinking over Marigold's triumph, Margot felt dumb-founded and helpless. That a man of Peter's intelligence and keen insight into affairs, should be completely under the sway of one so superficial and untrustworthy, was beyond understanding. That he should be incapable of using his own judgment to see through her pretences, her camouflage, was pathetic. And the worst of it was that no one—nothing, not even ocular proof of her rottenness—would convince him of the truth. What was it?

What, unless Marigold's clever tricks of sex-appeal, of which she was past-mistress, which could be relied upon for the enslavement of men? Examples of such had made history.

The weaker side of masculine human nature could not withstand the allure of such intimacies as Marigold invited, and the familiarites of seeming innocence. And Peter was already captivated by her beauty.

It had startled Margot to see Marigold's indifference to the fact that she was not sufficiently clad in the presence of a man not yet her husband. A smart dressing-gown lay at hand, but she had preferred to receive him in her flimsy silk pyjama-costume, elaborately trimmed, with insertions of transparent lace, sleeveless and ineffective, save to stir the imagination. She was cunning enough to know that in *déshabille* she was infinitely intriguing to a passionate lover, while unconsciousness and innocence under the circumstances, was her greatest appeal in Peter's eyes.

Thus was Peter rendered incapable of examining the charge of culpability against her and, right or wrong, was made her loyal partisan.

While Margot brooded on the ways of mankind and Peter's susceptibility in particular, Marigold still further won her lover's adoration by her magnanimous spirit. It was Christmas-time, therefore there must be peace

and goodwill in families. "I can't bear it. Forgive them, Peterkin darling," she coaxed. "I should never have made you a party to this family squabble."

"It is a great deal worse than a squabble, and who has a greater right to protect you than I?"

"No, no! I have no right to—to—embroil you. What a big word!" She laughed childishly, and innocently cuddled his hand to her bosom, making Peter thrill to the core at the softness and warmth of contact, unsolicited. "Families have to live in unity, and I don't want you to quarrel with Megan and Margot, to whom I owe so much! Second thoughts are always best. We are impulsive and foolish when we are angry, and it is so necessary to learn self-control. Poor Margot has a very soft corner for you, and she looked terribly cut up when you spoke to her like that. It would kill me if ever you spoke so to me!"

An inarticulate ejaculation from Peter, who had buried his lips in her ruffled hair.

"So, Peterkin, you must make it up. Shake hands with them before you go—at least, with Margot."

"How could I, after the way she has treated you? I heard her call you a 'treacherous liar'. It's the limit."

"Sisters say worse to each other, but no one takes it seriously, and no bones are broken. To please me, you must make it up. Remember I want only 'peace and goodwill', and shan't sleep if there is an atmosphere of ill-feeling about."

They argued for a while, till Peter, feeling that his visit was exceeding the conventional time-limit even for an engaged lover, rose to go. He promised, however, to heal the breach, but every one would have to know that anything said in detriment of her would be resented by him.

The sound of a closing door and footsteps in the passage was the sign to Megan and Margot, in the sitting-room of Peter's retirement. Had he been anyone else, Megan would have considered it her duty to have hinted earlier that it was time he went; but Peter was privileged and trustworthy, and might be allowed to flout conventions at the flat, for Marigold was safe with him.

"He's leaving," said Megan.

"Won't you see him to the door?" said Margot.

"Not I! If he says anything to me half as nasty as he said to you, I'm afraid I should let him have it."

"Someone should see him out—as a duty."

"If you want to act parlourmaid, there is nothing to prevent you."

Margot, feeling unable to resist the urge within her to see Peter once more, if only to show him that she could be equally distant and cold, rose, murmuring something about a formality, and arrived in the passage in time to see Peter putting on his overcoat.

"I'll see you to the door," said she quietly, holding herself very erect, head in air, as she slipped past him and moved the latch back. Nothing would induce her to meet his eye, but her heart behaved in an unprecedented manner, making her weak and tremulous.

"Au 'voir," said Peter, holding out his hand, which she pretended not to see. "I want to apologise."

She was too startled to know exactly how to proceed, for she had not expected the olive-branch so soon. Something in her personality, the honesty of her eyes as they were lifted to his, definitely shamed Peter for his late brusquerie, and he smiled deprecatingly. "I had no right to speak as I did. You are sisters, and have the liberty to fight out your own quarrels. Please forgive me, and shake hands."

When Peter's voice was friendly it became irresistible, and Margot placed her hand in his with readiness, though thoroughly bewildered at the unexpected capitulation.

"Marigold is the dearest, sweetest little soul alive, and she doesn't want any ill-feeling. Nor do I. I thought you would understand if I explained," he went on, holding her hand with an unconscious warmth, "that, loving her as I do, I am apt to be unjust to everyone else and attach undue weight to their acts and sayings. I felt very strongly all that has led to her breakdown, and cannot think that any of you really wish to blame her for that unhappy tragedy. Given time to consider things, I feel you, her sisters, will be more sympathetic, and take a kinder view



of it all. If you love her you will be quite ready to make allowances, and not exaggerate little acts of hers into intentional wrong-doing. Remember her age. She is not twenty, and such a child in mind! Her life is an open page. She has as beautiful a soul as she has a body, and her readiness to forgive all who have hurt her consciously or unconsciously makes her nature adorable. I want you, Margot, to be good to her. Please think of how much she is suffering over this unhappy affair, and comfort her a little. I shall be so grateful. Will you—will you?"

It was all so ingenuous.

Margot had no choice but to say she was ready to do all in her power to restore peace and goodwill in the family. It was a very distressing business altogether, and if she had said anything hurtful, it was only because she, too, had been greatly upset.

"You won't be unfair to the poor little kid?"—persuasively.

"I always try to be fair in all my dealings, Peter. Marigold could tell you that she has very small grounds of complaint against me on that score. I might have called her bad names—but that is entirely between us. . . ."

"I know," said Peter, releasing her hand, which he had been absently holding between both his. "Marigold said that sisters are privileged to say what they like to each other and no offence meant."

"Well, I'm so glad we are friends again, Peter," her wounded heart gradually recovering its normal action.

"We must never be anything but the best of friends, for you don't know how much I rely on you, Margot," he answered, passing out.

"Do take care of yourself. You don't look very strong," was her parting injunction, and she returned to tell Megan that all was peace and joy again. She however, kept away from Marigold, lest she should be tempted to reopen the subject of the quarrel, and call her worse names, which she richly deserved. It was left to Megan to look in on the sufferer to inquire after her bodily needs.

"How could you entertain Peter clothed so improperly?"

Megan asked, her virginal mind scandalised at the scantiness of Marigold's raiment.

"What's the matter with my clothes? Aren't they just lovely and smart?"

"You could have put on more, but you seem to have preferred wearing next to nothing. That pyjama-jacket leaves very little to the imagination when there's nothing underneath! You are absolutely barefaced!"

"So long as nothing else that is of importance to my reputation is 'bare', why worry? I am sure Peter isn't so critical."

"Seeing that you are not yet married—I don't know what to think of you. Remember, 'There's many a slip 'twixt the cup and lip'."

"I wish you would leave me alone!"

"I don't go for you for choice. You leave me no option when you behave indecently."

"Oh, you have a putrid mind!"

"It's a common habit for people like you to accuse modest minds of being on the look-out for evil—of seeing the bad in everything. It is retaliation! 'Putrid', indeed! You know very well that I would never stoop to attract a man after your fashion, by appealing to his physical side and what is base in human nature."

"I hope some worthy man will see the beauty of your soul, my dear, and get attracted in spite of your armour of modesty."

"You are very rude."

"And you are very interfering. I won't have you accuse me of indecency because I like to look nice for Peter, whom I am going to marry. He'll be seeing me in less than this, presently, so what does it matter? I'm truly sorry for you, for what a lot you are missing out of life! However, that's neither here nor there, and you may rest satisfied that Peter and I are very well-behaved. You need not have any anxiety on the score of propriety. Peter takes care of that."

Megan left the room in outraged silence.

## CHAPTER XV

## SOUNDING THE DEPTHS

PETER saw to it that Marigold was not distressed with the report of the coroner's inquest, which accorded a verdict of 'suicide while of unsound mind'. The reason for Bobby's unsound state of mind was not forthcoming, since his mother had pity on Marigold's youth and tragic remorse, and suppressed the letter that explained his act. Of what use to give such a sacred confidence to the world? Bobby would not have wished it, for he had died for his love, poor tortured heart! Publicity would do no one good. Let the world think that slow promotion, disappointed ambitions, nervous depression, were to blame. They certainly were indirect causes that led to his failure to win the girl of his dreams.

So Bobby was buried, and Marigold was content to be spared the harrowing details of the inquest. She fully concurred with the verdict that his mind had been deranged, and even added to conviction on that point with stories of the 'poor fellow's' insane conduct when they were out together, that had often made her afraid of him. He was so erratic—so queer. She really never knew how to treat him, and had therefore tried to be kind, but kindness had only made him worse, so she had dismissed him for good and all—with the result that was so devastating. Peter never let her harp on the subject, and took pains to warn people never to broach it; but he could not prevent Marigold from relieving her surcharged mind in a letter to Min, which read as follows—Min being the only one likely to understand the psychological value of such an incident in a girl's career.

*It was awful, getting the news so suddenly. I all but fainted, she wrote in continuation of her announcement. Poor Bobby, I am afraid, was mad about me, and perhaps*

it would have been wiser if I hadn't gone out with him while Peter was away. But I was bored doing nothing, and thought it would be fun going around with Bobby, who adored the ground I walked upon, and always was so thrilling and intense. Poor dear! Who was to know that he would take it all to heart so badly? His last letter broke me to pieces—the one he wrote his mother. It is terrible to be loved like that, and yet, not many girls have that experience! I mean a fellow dying because of her. It is very terrible, of course, but is something to remember all the days of one's life. I don't suppose anyone, not even Peter, cares as much as that. I only intended a little fun, so I let him behave as usual—that is, I hadn't the heart to stop him from making love. Besides, being so dull, it was rather diverting. But I wouldn't have Peter know, for worlds! He'd be fearfully annoyed and say it wasn't playing the game. I don't suppose it was, but one has to have a little fun sometimes, married or single, and I suppose I'm not different from most.

Bobby took me to a café that first night, where we had supper, and there was a cabaret show on, but he wouldn't pay attention, only pleaded and begged of me all the time to chuck Peter and be engaged to him, as we knew each other first and have been sweethearts for so long. I could not hurt his feelings by saying I preferred being engaged to Peter. Besides, I thought it would be fun to go out with him all the week Peter was away, so I temporised, and he foolishly began to think I would do what he wanted. Every evening we met and did something—a show, or the pictures—till I got fed-up, and as Peter was returning, I simply had to be definite. He then went daft and said all sorts of things to frighten me, but I wouldn't listen. I didn't believe that he would do anything really foolish when it came to the pinch, so I just told him it was all finished; that I wouldn't marry him anyhow, because he hadn't a bean and I couldn't live on ten pounds a week. I'm not built that way. It will be different in Malaya, where there are no theatres and dances, except once in a way, when we go to town—wherever that may be. One isn't so tempted, though how I am going to endure the life out there, I cannot pretend to say. It's going to be a big gamble for us both, and let us hope it will come off.

*Poor Bobby! You can imagine how I felt when I heard in the morning he had gone and done—that! I comfort myself with the thought that he must have been very weak minded and had I ever married him I certainly would have run away with another man in the end. Things happen for the best, for, had he lived, I might have gone on meeting him and getting his letters, which would have made Peter despise me, and that I should hate, for he's a dear, though I do wish he was a little more exciting and had money. As I told Mummy, it's the one fly in the ointment.*

*By the way, did you pinch my taffeta petticoat? If so, it is beastly mean of you, seeing that I wear it with my georgette afternoon frock. However, I suppose you hadn't enough of your own, and I hope you will take care of it. When I make my trousseau, out of the cheque I hope to get out of Peter, I'll give you a lot of my old things.*

*I had a row with Megan, as she thought I was most improper to let Peter see me in bed when I was wearing so little—the pink pyjams—you know. So nude! she said. Ha, ha! Megan is a scream. I guess I did look intriguing. But Peter was so good. Of all the fellows, one is safest with Peter, for you know exactly where you are. Write and let me know all about that Indian prince. Don't go out and get sentimental about him or think that it would be fine to marry him if he asks you, for Peter says that no white girl should marry an Indian prince, or peasant, for it would be a rotten mistake. They have harems, and don't see life from the same angle. You'd be miserable, even if weighted to earth with jewels. So take warning.*

Gradually Marigold resumed her normal habits, and was encouraged by Peter to enjoy life as if no tragedy had occurred to cast a shadow across her path. He could not bear to see her unhappy. Hers was a face made for sunshine and laughter, and he devoted himself to creating both for her. But when he suggested an immediate marriage by special licence with no fuss or festivities, Marigold found many excuses for delay. She was not half ready with her trousseau; she must wait till her mother's return from Essex to find out what was to be done about

it. The fact was that money was scarce, and, unless Mrs. Cowen sacrificed some more jewellery, Marigold did not know what she would do, unless Peter offered her a big cheque; and this did not occur to him. If it had, it would have been a difficult thing to do.

Peter saw no need for a trousseau, since she was always beautifully dressed. In Malaya, grand dresses would be wasted, and the simplest of things could do. This scared Marigold, for it made her feel that she was in reality going to the back o' beyond. Surely she would be going to town occasionally? Peter expected to pass through Penang, and it was possible they might sometimes visit Singapore, but she would not need anything better than she had already. Besides, after they were married, he thought he would be able to add somewhat to her wardrobe. The main point was to get married. He was impatient of delays. Since his return from Scotland his ardour had increased manifestly, and there were signs of smouldering jealousy when men wrote to Marigold showing that they were still interested in her, in spite of her engagement ring. She introduced him to several of her admirers whom they met from time to time, proud to show him off; but their persistency was unaccountable, for apparently they had little faith in Marigold's engagements till marriage placed her beyond their reach. It was the penalty of having a bride-elect so beautiful that most men envied him his luck. And Marigold enjoyed his impatience and his jealousy, being in no hurry to lose her freedom. So the actual date was not fixed.

In the meantime, Margot met Rolly Sherwell, who had long ceased to call at the flat. She was returning from work when she came face to face with Mr. Sherwell, as tall, thin and well-groomed as ever, just about to enter his car which stood in front of a tobacconist's in the city.

"Hullo!"

"Hullo! what a surprise," said she, without enthusiasm.

"What are you doing here?"

"I'm one of the world's workers, as you know," she answered.

"So am I. I've been working dashed hard, and feel like slacking. Do come and slack with me."

"That's very sudden of you. You shouldn't spring surprises on me, for you and I were never playmates."

"No, all the worse for me, or you might have taught me sense. You were always the brains of the family."

"How nice of you to appreciate me. Since when have you taken to admiring brains?" She laughed.

"Do get in," said he, holding the open door of his car.

"I am catching a train Underground."

"You can't miss them; they are continuous; so come and have tea first with me somewhere. I'm parched."

Margot hesitated and fell. She also was parched, and was seized with an idea that it was providential, meeting with Rolly, for something might come of it in the interests of Megan.

They drove to the first restaurant that suggested itself, and Rolly Sherwell followed her languidly to a corner table, where he ordered tea for two. "What is it you were saying?" he asked, a gleam of mischief in his eye.

"You were discussing my brains."

"I remember. I was regretting that you hadn't taken me in hand. Why did you allow your little sister to play with my young affections? I might have gone the way of Bobby if I had had less strength of mind."

"It's nothing to joke about."

"It isn't. What a good thing it is to be a reader of character. Tell me—does she see anything of that fellow I introduced her to?"

"Who do you mean?"

"A queer devil calling himself Timpson—a striking vindication of the Darwin theory."

"Where did you meet that man? And what do you know of him?"

"Let me see. We were at Ranelagh, and Marigold was with Bobbie Slack instead of with me, as I had suggested the day before. I met a bunch of fellows I used to know, and Timpson was with them, so marvellously to hand for an experiment that I leapt at it—simply leapt! The idea of the experiment was to prove that Marigold has a great

respect for money, and will put up with a chimpanzee if rolling in wealth. I introduced the chimpanzee as a millionaire from Texas, and, being more credulous than most, she accepted him as such, and soon had him eating out of her hand. After that, I lost interest, and haven't seen much of her. What happened?"

"Nothing," said Margot, determined not to give him the satisfaction of hearing the end of the story. "Have you not heard anything of him at all?" (All efforts to trace him through the police having, so far, failed.)

"Not a word."

"Who was he?"

"I haven't the faintest idea. A commercial man—a traveller for some firm abroad. I wonder if he knew that he was regarded as a Texan millionaire, for I took the precaution of telling Marigold not to name Texas to him on any account, as it was a very sore subject." And Rolly laughed heartily. Tea arrived, and Margot poured it out.

"I think you have an extraordinary idea of humour. Anyhow, perhaps you know that Marigold is engaged to be married . . .?"

"Is she really? I have seen her occasionally with a big fair fellow—rather good-looking."

"Mr. Dunbar—a brother of Mrs. Nicholl. You know the Nicholls?"

"I think I do. Well, give her my very best wishes," said Rolly. "I'm sorry I fooled her about the man named Timpson. But why should we talk of Marigold? I am far more interested in—someone else"—his colour deepened, and for the first time he showed embarrassment. "Megan is treating me rottenly—and I dare say I deserve it. Is there no hope that she will smile on me again?"

"Why should she trouble either way?"

"No reason at all. She dropped me like a hot potato when I was finding Marigold amusing, and when I tried to show her that it was merely a little diversion, Marigold being distinctly diverting, Megan as good as cut me dead. Now you, Margot, have a heap of common sense. Have I sinned past forgiveness?"

Margot contemplated his face for a moment and saw



that, underlying his superficial impudence, there was real earnestness.

"What do you want of Megan?"

"I think a tremendous lot of Megan. I think more of her to-day than ever before, for I have seen how she is keeping her end up, and is the backbone of her family. I respect her immensely and imagine her lot isn't a bed of roses." He lowered his voice for her ear alone.

"How do you know anything about it?"

"I read between the lines. Not being in love with Marigold, I sifted her prattle, and learned all I wanted to know of Megan."

"You took rather a funny way of finding out, didn't you? For anyone would have thought you were Marigold's shadow."

"For just a little while I was in danger of becoming her slave. But—an unscrupulous devil like myself can turn a kid like Marigold inside out and plumb the depths of her with ease. Having made her give herself away many times—she's a disloyal little baggage—I discovered that I was faithful to my first love. Will you believe that? I'd give a lot to feel that Megan wasn't despising me as I deserve. Will you befriend me in this? I want to meet her and let her wipe her feet on me, if that will do any good, then—kiss and be friends."

"If you know Megan, it won't be easy to wipe out the past. I suppose you led her to believe you cared?"

Rolly hung his head and made no answer.

"With a girl like Megan, who has the pride of Lucifer, what happened afterwards would be unforgettable. I can't see her unbend, having once suffered a great humiliation and not a little pain."

"What would you advise me to do?" It was a very different Rolly who put the question. She could see his anxiety, all flippancy having vanished.

"I don't know that I can advise anything. You have to work out your own salvation, Rolly. If you are really in earnest, I dare say you will find a way."

"I mean to try! Megan is one in a thousand. I respect her above all women, Margot. She's the sort a fellow wants

for a wife, for he can bank his all on her and win. She'd never let him down. I've been a priceless fool, and would do anything to wipe out my folly."

"Megan is very wonderful. She has an amazing sense of duty, is very unselfish, and as straight as a die. She is very human, too." Margot smiled, as she thought of the rows with Marigold and Min; the time she went on strike; and how intolerant she was of deceit and selfishness.

"What a wife for a man!"

Margot heartily concurred, and having finished her tea rose to go.

"I'll see you home," said Rolly.

"I would rather you left me at the nearest Underground, for I might have to explain things to Megan, and she'd regard me as a traitress, which would spoil things for you for ever."

"Is it as bad as that?"—ruefully. "I wrote, and she never answered my letter."

"That's how it is, and I advise you to go very carefully if you are in deadly earnest."

Margot was driven to the nearest railway, and the Metropolitan took her to Notting Hill Gate, whence she walked home, as on most evenings when her work was done, but her heart felt lighter and her step more elastic with hope for Megan springing up within.

A few days later, Mrs. Cowen and Min returned home, the month having flown on wings, and nothing could equal the flatness of life for them both after the excitement of their visit to Mrs. Legge's luxurious abode. It was pathetic to see Mrs. Cowen, unable to settle to anything, a helpless look in her wide blue eyes, so like Marigold's when she wanted to impress Peter with her ingenuousness.

"You are prettier than ever, Mummy!" cried Margot, astonished to see the wonders wrought by change and diversion. "Are you feeling quite strong again?"

"Don't ever ask her such a question," said Min. "Take it for granted, as Mums reacts at once to suggestion. Any doubt makes her search herself for symptoms, and she'll be producing a new ailment for want of something better to do."

Mrs. Cowen slapped Min's cheek playfully.

"Impertinent child! No, my dear," she sighed. "I am not complaining, though I would like to feel as energetic as I did at Moreton. But then, the air is so different. It is also rather demoralising to have to return to—this. One so easily gets out of the habit of poverty, and to return to it after such a holiday as I have had is depressing. But I know it cannot be helped. Perhaps you had better let me do something," she said to Megan, who bustled in and out full of household duties. "I am sure I could do something—if you told me how."

"You sit still and have an easy time. I am sure that will agree with you best of all, and us too, for too many cooks spoil the broth, you know. If Min does her duty, we'll manage." She made no reference to Marigold, who was rarely at home, while Margot was of little use as a helper except at week-ends.

"Megan always treats me as if I were a dummy or a fool," said Mrs. Cowen, fretfully. "One would think this was not my home. And I suppose that is precisely what I am meant to feel. I should have remembered that I'm little more than a guest of Megan and Margot."

"Of course, you *would* say a thing like that!" cried Megan, annoyed. "One would think I was the most undutiful daughter living."

"That was horrid of you, darling!" from Margot to her mother.

Mrs. Cowen wiped the tears from her eyes and made an effort to smile. "I suppose it all comes of reaction. It feels so odd having to return home to this cheerless room, and to feel that one can't command a car for drives, or have friends dropping in to tea. The excitement of dinner-parties and listening to the wireless—how the girls and boys danced to the music by Jack Payne!"

"You, too, Mummy! Don't leave out your share of the fun. Yes, Mummy danced too!—we made her, and old Mr. Merriman paid her such compliments. Oh, Mummy clicked all right!"

"How vulgar you are!" said Mrs. Cowen, blushing.

"Never mind, darling. It's good to think you had such a happy time. And you'll have plenty of fun again," said Margot. "You'll come to the pictures with me on Saturday. That's booked."

## CHAPTER XVI

### THE TEMPTER

By spring, Mrs. Cowen was taking an active interest in life. Having made many new friends through those she had met at Moreton Gadsby, and by searching out some of the old, scarcely a day passed without an engagement with someone in town, and she enjoyed being teased by her children on her smartness and youthful appearance. To none of the functions at which she was a guest did she think it necessary for her girls to be invited. She had already settled in her own mind that Megan would be an old maid, for no one of her strict sense of duty and exact philosophy was ever attractive enough to win a husband. Margot was well occupied in a "billet" which was a credit to her, and nothing was to interfere with her keeping it. If she took to spending evenings out, her efficiency during the day would be imperilled. Marigold was provided for by Peter, and Min was as yet too young to be officially brought out. So she was free to enjoy life again.

One day, she came home greatly exercised in mind concerning Marigold's prospects, for someone she had met from Malaya had upset all her preconceived ideas on the subject of that country. Having been thoroughly disturbed, she proceeded to discuss the subject with Marigold, and so alarmed her that, unknown to Peter, his chances were desperate.

"Mrs. Symington-Slade looks awful! If you saw her you'd have a fit," said Mrs. Cowen, as Marigold darned a ladder for her in one of her silk stockings. "When she told me of all she had been through on her husband's

rubber plantation, I thought immediately of you, and it occurred to me that if you became like her it would be a tragedy!"

This, after a description of Mrs. Symington-Slade's emaciated appearance, her parchment-like skin, and ghoulish features. She had once had the reputation of being a handsome woman, but Mrs. Cowen had failed to see any suggestion of beauty in what was left of her looks.

"Tell me what she said it's like there?" Marigold's voice sounded nervous.

"It's so warm all the time that you perspire continuously. Powder is useless; your nose shines like a beacon in two minutes, and you rapidly lose all your colour. No one out there has any colour, she says. The sun makes a nigger of you if you are exposed to it and escape a stroke; or, if you avoid it, you are bleached white. Peter would be burnt to a cinder if he didn't wear a pith hat down to his neck, for he has to go out in the sun, but *you* couldn't stand it a moment, and would simply fade out—your skin turn like leather; and what with blackwater fever and malaria, to say nothing of cholera epidemics and enteric, I just wonder anyone is alive! How can Peter wish to take you there?"

"But Peter says that there are wives who brave it out, and only come home once in a few years. They get acclimatised, like himself."

"I suppose they do, but what do they look like? Does he say?"

"N—no. I didn't ask him, but I will."

"He'll never tell you the truth. When a man is in love, he'll lie for all he is worth not to lose his girl. I think Peter had better sell that estate. He can easily buy a partnership in some business and settle in England. You might have to put up with economies at first, but it will be better than going to such a country and becoming a wreck while you are still young. Mrs. Symington-Slade is a sight. I was her partner at a bridge-party and it nearly made me revoke, looking at the hollows in her cheeks, and the way they flopped in and out as she talked. She had

so much to tell us about the snakes and the malaria, that we couldn't get on at all, and half the time I did not know who had declared what."

A great deal more on the subject caused Marigold to make up her mind definitely on the subject of living in Malaya, and she was not a little resentful that Peter had kept all those horrors to himself.

Consequently, when he called to see her that afternoon and they had the sitting-room to themselves, she confessed all that was on her mind, put there by her mother.

"Why didn't you tell me, Peter?" Her blue eyes looked so reproachful, that Peter was seized with alarm lest she was contemplating breaking with him.

"Darling—it's a frightful exaggeration. Besides, I thought you knew from what I told you that it wouldn't be like England. The climate is quite tropical, and that means it's warm all the year round."

But Marigold had clearly not realised what it meant. Never having known any prolonged spell of warm weather other than she had experienced in an English summer, the word 'tropical' had no meaning for her, beyond jungles and palm trees, birds of paradise, and muslins. She felt that she had been cheated, and a discussion followed in which Peter again had an insight into the limitations of his beloved's mind, and its illogical reasoning. According to her, it was Peter's duty to consider her first and his business after. If he loved her really and truly, he would let business go hang rather than allow her to lose her health and strength where it was nothing short of manslaughter for white women to live. Men were strong, and when acclimatised, might overcome the ills and the germs; but women were different, and should never be asked to sacrifice their lives all for nothing. His duty to her, since they were engaged, was to get rid of his estate and live at home. He could not in reason expect her to feel happy at the prospect of becoming yellow like a Chinaman, with a skin like leather, and hollow cheeks that flopped when she talked!

Peter could have laughed had she not been desperately in earnest—bless her heart! So he talked instead, doing

his best to present things from a less alarming angle. But he could not deny her challenge respecting risks from malaria and other dread germs; or pretend that snakes never came into a bungalow in the rains, and that people were never known to die of blackwater fever in those parts. He was powerless to impress her, after that, of the picturesqueness of Malaya, the peacefulness, the quietude, the poetry of the sunsets. Marigold had no interest in art outside what personally affected her own appearance, and had no desire to live a quiet life.

"Peter darling," she cried, nestling into his arms in the loving way she had when determined to win him to her point of view. "It will break my heart to give you up, but Mummy is dead against my going out to Malaya, since seeing Mrs. Symington-Slade. She'll never consent to it. You'll have to sell up and come away."

"Mrs. Symington-Slade isn't a fair sample," he protested. "Her place is one of the worst——"

But he was not allowed to continue while Marigold enacted Delilah.

"Do you *want* to see me broken down in health?"

"Darling——!"

"Are you wishing to make me suffer intolerably?"

"My sweetheart, I——"

Her soft palm over his lips stopped his answering her unanswerable questions.

"Do you love me, *really* and *truly*?"

"You know I do! You know that I am wrapped up in you, body and soul. That I could not give you up—it would be the death of all hope and joy in life. Marigold—be merciful, my precious one."

"I do love you, Peter"—her lips pressing his. "I want to keep on loving you where we are both strong and well and happy. I cannot risk breaking it all up with sickness—having to be sent home and being parted from you once we are all-in-all to each other. I would rather live on a crust of bread here, in England, than pile up money out there. Peter—you must get rid of that estate."

Peter was silent, as he had no words with which to tell her of the suicidal policy that would be. With rubber

at its lowest ebb, to get rid of his estate, what would be realised that would give him enough to live upon and speculate with in some new line of business of which he had no experience?

Accepting his silence as a disposition to yield, she redoubled her persuasions, till Peter, like Samson, was robbed of his strength. If that was her ultimatum and it meant either selling his estate or breaking his engagement, he had no choice, for what was anything worth to him without her? He held her close, inhaling the sweet perfume of her, kissing her soft lips, drinking in the promises of future Elysium, till it did not seem so impossible after all, to establish himself in some small way to start with. He had a floating vision of a motor-agency with show-rooms in a popular centre of London, such as many fellows before him had made successful. His friends in Malaya could be notified through the shipping agents that he could supply them with the right cars when they came home on leave. It was not the time to be pessimistic with Marigold in his arms and ready to be his wife the minute he was established on a secure basis, with a reasonable prospect of developing the business towards a successful issue.

"It means," said he, after a time, when Marigold, flushed and triumphant, produced her vanity case, and began repairing the ravages to her marcelled waves and complexion, "that I am going to lose quite a lot of money. That we shall have to go slow for some time. Are you ready to face that?"

"Why not?" she asked, peering into a two-inch mirror. "It won't be for long. You're bound to fall on your feet. See the faith I have in you!"

"Thank you, sweetheart. It is good to hear you say that. But—it also means that our marriage will have to be postponed—indefinitely—at least, till I know what I am doing, and how I stand. First, I will have to sell my property. That takes time." His voice failed, for the crushing disappointment to himself was unspeakable.

"Don't let's cross any bridges, Peter! I'm an optimist, and I am perfectly happy to think that we shan't have



to go to that benighted land peopled by blacks, when England is so much better. It is home, and it means we won't ever need to part."

Peter was in agreement on the subject of partings, for he had seen the tragedy of broken-up homes. One other loss would be spared him, also her, when it came to a family. This last thought he expressed as mutual consolation. "I have always thought it so pitiful for a mother to have to miss the joy of bringing up her own babies, because European children don't thrive after a certain age in the East. That, at least, will be saved you, darling."

"*Me?*—but I am never going to have children, Peter. Never! Of that I am determined. I'm too great a coward to face the ordeal, and it would kill me even to think of it. Besides, I'm not too fond of kiddies, believe me! They are a dreadful tie, and such an expense."

Peter smiled, refusing to take her seriously, for she would change her tune when the mother-instinct was born in her, the longing to cuddle to her bosom the pledge of their love!

The news that Peter had decided to sell his property in India came as a bombshell to Kit, who discussed it with George, after which they both came to the conclusion that a man in love was not responsible for his actions.

"He must be mad," said George. "For he's going to lose heavily, if he sells now."

"He'll beggar himself rather than go against her, and since she has made up her mind that Malaya won't suit her, that's the end of the argument. How Peter has changed! But don't you all go clean daft over a foolish, empty-headed beauty?"

"I suppose you are not far wrong, though all beauties are not empty-headed, judging by my experience," which earned a hug from Kit, who had not yet yielded her title to be considered a very handsome woman.

"I wish I had never introduced Peter to that family, but it is too late for regrets. He's Marigold's slave, and she gives him no peace in her thirst for pleasure. Can't

he see that she will never be the right sort of wife for a man who has to make his way? But he has a touching hope that once they are man and wife she will settle down and darn his socks, a picture of devoted wifehood and motherhood!"

George had a theory that love was a disease, the only cure for which was disillusionment, and then it could hardly be called a cure, for it was a knock-out.

"I am beginning to think my precious brother is a fool. And after he said his head was screwed on tight where girls were concerned!"

"Well—you can't teach us," George laughed. "Shakespeare knew what he was about when he said—*I do much wonder that one man seeing how another man is a fool when he dedicates his behaviours to love, will, after he hath laughed at such shallow follies in others, become the argument of his own scorn by falling in love.*"

Mrs. Cowen heard of Peter's decision with satisfaction. She was not concerned with any loss of money it must inevitably entail, for losses and gains were all in the day's work. Every business had to contend with losses, and the gains were a question of wise readjustments concerning which womenfolk, however, had no responsibility. She congratulated Marigold on having prevailed on her lover to act sensibly, and continued to make fresh engagements and to occupy her leisure with shopping, so that she need not again feel bored with life. Occasionally, handsome cars called for her and fetched her to the house of a new acquaintance, and the family heard less and less about her nerves.

Megan reserved judgment on the matter of Peter's change of plans, and was bitterly disappointed that it obliged him to postpone the marriage, but as he was not to blame for the course he was forced to take, and Mrs. Cowen strongly supported Marigold's determination not to live in Malaya, there was nothing for it but to bow to the inevitable. Marigold still shared her room with Min and continued to confide in her when in need of a safety valve for her feelings, and Min returned the compliment by boasting of her conquests, and of how she was

in the habit of meeting Prince Oolookibeta frequently in town. When she went out saying that she and Lucy were going together to the pictures, it was not true, for it was generally to fulfil an appointment with the Indian.

As Marigold was aware that it was a dangerous proceeding for one so young, she did what she could to warn her little sister against trusting foreigners. She could hardly lecture her on her deceit, seeing that people in glass houses could not very well throw stones.

"Peter is dead against mixed marriages, with Indians specially," she continued. "And if you don't take care, you'll be drawn into one like a silly fool, thinking you'd like to be a princess! It cuts no ice, as they say in America, to be that sort of princess. It won't go down in English society out there."

"That's all you know about it," said Min. "There are heaps of Englishwomen married to Indians, and they are invited to everything. The old prejudice is fast dying. Besides, when a man is as rich as Prince Oolookibeta, he is run after by everybody, and is a power to reckon with in his country."

"Well, I don't care what you think, but if you keep it up, I'll have to tell Megan and Mummy——"

"Mummy knows him and thinks he's most interesting."

"Mummy doesn't know of these meetings, and you are too young to be allowed to judge for yourself."

"You aren't going to tell about me, are you?"

"I certainly shall if you meet him any more."

They quarrelled fiercely till Min settled the matter by threatening to give Marigold away to Peter.

"What have you to say of me?" sneered Marigold.

"You forget you wrote me a letter after Bobby's death—I have it still, and Peter won't think the better of you if he reads it."

Marigold, having forgotten what it was about, demanded to see the letter and was refused, as Min preferred to hold it as a threat over her head in case she turned nasty.

"It's only bluff."

"It isn't. You told me all about how you behaved with Bobby, letting him make love to you right up to

the time Peter was to come back, and he lying ill in Scotland! It will finish him, for it's in black and white, in your own handwriting, and no amount of palaver will make him want to marry you after he finds you out."

"I think you are perfectly mean."

"Well, don't you interfere with me, and I will let you alone. But what's the use of quarrelling over nothing at all? I'm old enough to know my own mind, and if I want to marry an Indian no one is going to stop me."

"You'll have black babies."

"They might take after me."

"How can you bear to have an Oriental make love to you?"

"I am not sure but that I rather like it. Don't be a prig, Marigold, but come and meet him. He'd be all over himself with delight, and I shan't be jealous, for you are engaged and haven't any use for Indians. He and a bunch of Indians are at the Metropolis Hotel in Grosvenor Gardens. Two of them are married, with their wives on the spot to see they are not up to larks. Not Purdah ladies by any means, on the contrary, for they are more than free, and my word! they know the meaning of emancipation! Bridge-parties, cocktails, night clubs. Their husbands look on astounded, but can't do anything with them. It's so funny. Come and meet them, then you can see my prince, and judge for yourself what a perfect gentleman he is."

"How can I go anywhere alone when there is Peter?" Marigold looked as if the suggestion intrigued her, but Peter had to be reckoned with.

"Why not some day when Peter has a business engagement all afternoon? You can be back by the time he calls to take you out. The best idea would be to let me fix up a partner for you, and we can do a *thé dansant*."

"I don't want an Indian partner, and besides, Peter would be frightfully hurt if he found out."

"It needn't be an Indian, for there are heaps of English and American people at that hotel, whom my prince knows, and who would be as keen as knives if they knew they were to be introduced to a girl like you. And why

should you tell Peter? You didn't tell him about Bobby or any other fellow you have met since you were engaged."

Marigold looked dubious, for the adventure appealed strongly to her mind. As a matter of fact, being engaged to be married was all very well, but as it was going to be a long engagement, it would be rather dull if she could not do little things without dragging Peter in. And if telling him was likely to make trouble, it was kindness not to tell.

"I don't mind just for once," she agreed.

"Good! Then you can tell me what you think of the prince."

"Mind you ask him to choose someone nice for me. I adore Peter, but so do some wives adore their own husbands, and have a good time all the same."

"Peter is a bit of a stick, from my point of view. He's so frightfully good. He never dreams of looking at other girls and just lies down for you to walk over him."

"He's not a bit dull, but I do wish he wouldn't put me on a pedestal. If only he'd be more human and let himself go for a little, or not be so ready to give way all the time. I get fed-up and impatient. He's such a dear and I hate hurting him, but it would be far more exciting if we had some quarrels, so that we could enjoy making them up."

"The mischief is, he thinks you an angel without wings. He is too fond of you—like carrying all one's eggs in the one basket. If ever they drop—smash!—he'll be like Bobby."

"Don't!" cried Marigold, sharply. "I can't bear to hear you say that. There isn't anyone equal to Peter, and I am frightfully fond of him. I grumble, but I wouldn't change him for anyone."

"Unless you suddenly find you could marry a man as rich as my prince. Say he wasn't Indian and could give you a title, a place in the country, a villa in Italy, a house in town. Suppose he offered you a car of your own to drive, and servants galore, I don't believe you would stick to Peter and do what Megan has to do here—perhaps keep one maid and cook on her evenings out. Sweep

and clean, and wear last year's frocks, ride in buses and take your holidays cheaply at Margate or Brighton! I don't think!"

Marigold put her fingers in her ears and told Min to go to the devil.

## CHAPTER XVII

### MAKING ALLOWANCES

SELLING his rubber estate during a slump presented no difficulty to Peter since he was determined not to allow any consideration to stand in his way. He was prepared to accept the first reasonable offer, being anxious to take the disagreeable plunge before second thoughts brought reaction to checkmate his hopes. He wanted to please Marigold, who was more to him than anything in life, and if he was a fool, there are lots of such lovable fools in this life, and will continue in folly so long as love is blind.

'Where there's a will there's a way', was demonstrated in Peter's case when he taught himself to believe that he had only to strike out to swim. He argued himself into the belief that, given a certain amount of capital, there was no reason why he should not succeed in business, if it was a sound proposition. Everything took time, and he would have to be painstaking and careful, with Marigold to encourage and help him as a loving wife should. He even saw that it would be possible to fix the date for his marriage without the need to wait till he was properly established, for it would be unjust to expect his beloved to wait indefinitely for actual prosperity. Most people climbed to fortune, and he knew scores of wives who bore with all the petty deprivations necessary when on the first rungs of the ladder. He was, however, a little doubtful of Marigold's training in domestic economy; but she was young and could learn.

Peter cabled to his agents in Malaya and the deal

was completed, he came out of it with optimism though a considerable loser, but with sufficient capital to encourage a fresh start in life.

The moment it was known that he was ready to embark on a business adventure, he was inundated with callers, all of whom had suggestions to offer concerning the way to get rich quickly. Inventors brought designs of strange and ingenious patents that baffled understanding, young film companies struggling for existence waited upon his co-operation for immediate success. Commerce and industry alike sought his intervention, and directorships of mushroom concerns were his for acceptance. It was difficult for him to understand why anyone with money to invest in such promising speculations ever lost it. Nevertheless, he focused his mind on the garage idea and went thoroughly into the examination of it as something practical and meeting the requirements of an ever mobile public.

At this time, with the spring well advanced and so much to do, he found he had less leisure than ever to spend in the society of his beloved. Appointments early and late had to be kept, so that Marigold had to be content with the oft-repeated assurance that he loved her just the same, no matter if he was closeted with lawyers and estate agents, snowed under by plans and documents, while eating out his heart with longing for freedom to rush straight to her.

What was he doing?

He tried to explain that he was about to buy a going concern comprising public garages and repair-works in the neighbourhood of Oxford Street, with show-rooms attached. The proprietor had died suddenly and his widow wanted to retire into the country and have nothing more to do with the business.

"But you don't know anything about how garages are run. You shouldn't worry, but leave it to those who do," said Marigold. "You should engage someone who is up to the tricks of the trade and let him take charge, otherwise you are sure to drop money."

"I am sure to drop money if I don't get to know all that is to be known on the subject of running such a business. So few people can be trusted to look after one's

interests more than their own. No. I've got to get right down to it and make it a success, no matter what I sacrifice of my own inclinations."

"And mine," she returned reproachfully.

Peter spent a long time pointing out to her how he was serving their joint interests by mastering his job. Soon they would marry and he would have the inestimable advantage of coming home always to her. What a divine prospect!

But his beloved was such a child in her outlook, and somehow her desires and ambitions were often at variance with his! They would spend all Sunday house-hunting, flat-hunting, and discussing the advantages and disadvantages of situations to settle where they should begin their married life together. Marigold decided against villa residences in the suburbs, as anything 'suburban' was anathema to her. A flat in town was more in keeping with her ideas, and when they went forth to seek the right sort, Peter found that his precious one's ideals were far beyond his means. Marigold was content with a small flat so long as it was in the right locality. Better, said she, to pay a high rent for a three-roomed flat, that is to say, bedroom, dressing-room and living-room, in Mayfair, where they would be in the midst of things, than a lower rent for a larger flat of five rooms in Bayswater, Kensington, or Bloomsbury. She could not endure to give an address to tradespeople, or strangers, that would make her blush with humiliation. She ruled out looking for a place near his work, as she could not bear living right among shops and show-rooms. It wasn't done. All this she said with childish distress and petulance till Peter was miserable for her. How was he to please her unless he strained a point and took risks? Once when he dropped in unexpectedly to see Marigold on a Saturday afternoon and found that she had made an engagement with Min, he took comfort in Margot's society which at all times was refreshment. Margot had such a clear mind, such a practical grasp of things, and could be trusted to advise anyone twice her age. Moreover, Margot had such a lively sympathy for the troubles of others and was always ready to



help. He was beginning to know and appreciate Margot whom he had seen under various circumstances and found a right good sort. On this occasion, he told her some of his problems and perplexities, and waited for consolation.

"I'd do anything in the world for her. She knows it. I think for her, work for her, and wish only to succeed that she might be in comfort and ease for the rest of her days. This will be impossible if, at the start, before I know where I am, we incur heavy liabilities. Rents in town are a bit heavy."

"But Peter, you shouldn't let Marigold think that she must always have things her own way. She's too young to decide big things like this. She is going to marry you, so she must put up with the home you make for her according to your means."

Peter smiled helplessly. "She wouldn't see that, poor darling. She'd imagine I was stinting things nervously—that I had no courage and, therefore, am inviting failure."

"What is her idea?"

"That we should make a splash. Money makes money, bluff deceives the world. The appearance of success is half the way to it. If people see we are living in opulent circumstances they will draw their own conclusions which will react favourably on business. She doesn't believe in being cautious and cutting one's coat according to one's cloth. Someone has been putting a lot of this sort of stuff into her dear little nut." His eyes were soft and yearning at the very thought of that dear little marcelled head, for he would soon have the right of ownership.

"Peter, you are horribly weak with Marigold. She'd think a lot more of you if you put your foot down and said—'No more nonsense. I'm the best judge of what is to be done. You'll live with me where I choose to have a home, and when business booms and I am turning over big profits, you can then move lock, stock, and barrel to Mayfair. That's that'. What's the fun of a tiny flat in the West End where you can't turn round and there isn't a scrap of room for a nursery? Why, Peter, you two must look ahead. What are you going to do if there is a family? You'd have to have a room for a nurse and

the baby, to begin with." And then Margot blushed violently, having been carried away beyond the bounds of convention, in the excitement of the argument.

Peter contributed his share to the blushes and so far forgot his manners as to light a cigarette without permission. And while lighting it he almost loved Margot for her sympathetic thought. What was more alluring than this little picture she flashed before his mental vision of a nursery in his home and Marigold's baby that would call him 'Daddy'? But Marigold refused to think so far ahead. Indeed, she refused to cater for what was, to her, an undesired probability.

"I don't think Marigold has any wish in that direction," he managed to say while breathing forth smoke.

"And you?—surely . . .?"

Peter's eyes, always his most expressive feature, showed his total disagreement on the point, and nothing further was said concerning this hypothetical issue. They discussed, instead, what was best to be done, and Margot, knowing her sister, warned Peter to be very firm when it came to furnishing the flat wherever they decided to live.

"You'll have to watch that, for Marigold is extravagant; no use shutting your eyes to that fact."

"You can't blame her," said he. "She has been brought up to have everything she wanted in life, except just lately——"

"I am not blaming her," said Margot, who could have pointed out that she, herself, and Megan, had both learned to live expensively, but had had the sense to face things after the smash, and go slow. "I only want you to keep a check on her, for she'll be like a runaway horse with the bit between its teeth once she begins furnishing. There is no denying that she has great taste, and will visualise a colour-scheme to which everything will have to be subordinated and at any cost. You can fancy Marigold in a furniture store choosing a suite for her bedroom. Do you think the price will have any weight? She'll fall for what appeals to her artistic eye, and you'll be asked to pay the bill. The same in the matter of a dining-room and a drawing-room——"

"Don't Margot!—you frighten me," he laughed.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't worry. I have greater confidence in Marigold's intelligence than that. I'll limit her and so save disaster. Poor dear! I hope the time won't be far distant when I shall be able to give her a blank cheque and tell her to do what she likes with it."

"No harm in being an optimist. But I'll do my best to knock a little horse-sense into her head. She is devoted to you, so for your sake she should climb down a little and make sacrifices."

"That's the sweetest thing you have said," cried Peter gratefully, and Margot glowed under his approval and thrilled to the look of brotherly affection in his honest eyes.

"How about coming out to tea somewhere?" said he, eager to show his appreciation of her sisterly interest. "This is a great opportunity, as I'm at a loose end, and the chance may not occur again in a hurry."

"Why not? Thank you, I'd love it." Delightful inspiration! She was going to tea with Peter. Stealing a little joy out of Marigold's cup of happiness. No one could grudge it to her as she rarely had the pleasure of his society all to herself. He was so completely Marigold's that to see him with any other member of Marigold's family meant nothing. Nor could Marigold object, for she had engaged herself for the afternoon without reference to him—some mismanagement—and he was surely at liberty now to do likewise.

Margot put her head in at the kitchen door where Megan was busy cleaning out the gas stove, her head wrapped in a dishcloth, her hands encased in rubber gloves, and announced her intention of going out with Peter. "I shan't be in to tea."

"Thank goodness!" was the reply. "You're all out, so I can get on with it."

"Shall I make you a cup of tea before I go?" asked Margot sympathetically, for it was quite possible that Megan would do without, rather than take the trouble while so horribly engaged.

"Don't worry me. Get out! You're making a draught, and things blow about."

Margot fled, tidied herself, changed into a neat little afternoon frock she had bought at a sale at High Street, Kensington, for a sum that made it worthless in Marigold's sight, chose a close-fitting felt hat that suited all purposes, and was driven away in Peter's car to town, with the idea of dropping in somewhere for tea.

"Where shall we go?" was Peter's question as they slid along in his *coupé*.

"I don't mind. Let it be anywhere—cheap."

Peter was reminded of Marigold's suggestion the first time he took her out. She no longer showed the same consideration for his purse, but he could not blame her, as he had spoilt her with indulgence. He had been on holiday and had delighted in giving her a good time. The holiday was over now, and it would be difficult to suggest a reconstruction of ideas so suddenly.

"I refuse to take you to any cheap restaurant," said he. "It is very rarely that I have the privilege of entertaining you, Margot, and I want to do it properly."

"I won't be a party to extravagance, Peter."

"How nice you look, Margot"—affectionately, for his heart warmed towards the spirited little woman he had first met in a London crowd, only to fall in love with her sister! (If he had never known Marigold, he was sure that . . .) "Look here—let's go to a *thé dansant*. Do say 'yes'. You will have a chance to learn how well I can dance since Marigold took me in hand."

Margot, still reacting to his praise and feeling very happy, consented. "Where shall it be?"

He suggested a new, very smart hotel where the band was said to be the best in London. He had just heard of it and wanted to sample it before taking Marigold there. Did she mind?

Mind? Margot was greedily anxious to sample anything with Peter for her escort. Just for once she would enjoy deceiving the ever curious public into thinking she was in the company of her 'boy', and sense their admiration of his fine physique, clean-cut face, and pleasing personality.

It was inconceivable to her that Marigold should not want to thank God every day of her life for Peter. How could she take such advantage of his unselfish devotion and cause him constant pin-pricks of disappointment? She believed, too, that Marigold often behaved in a way to rouse his jealousy and give him hours of needless suffering just to satisfy her insatiable vanity. (Oh, Peter, Peter! she cried within her while looking at him across the tea-table in a corner of a vast *facé* where a wide space was given up to dancing. What great trouble are you laying up in store for yourself by your love for Marigold?) She had heard it said that some men were very like children in their dealings with women. That was why good wives were mothers to their husbands as well as wives, which resulted in an ideal marriage. Margot could imagine mothering Peter, and for a while was lost in thoughts of how she would care for his needs. See that he fed well, had his clothes aired, that he rested from his labours. And she imagined a glowing fire with Peter's slippers warming, and Peter smoking a pipe which he preferred to cigarettes but was never allowed to smoke in Marigold's presence, reading a newspaper, a look of absolute contentment on his face, while his wife, who was no other than herself, equally contented, mended his shirts and darned his hose.

She came back to the present with a shock when a party swept by in the wake of a waiter who led the way to a table at the far side, on the border of the dance floor, for Min's voice was unmistakable.

"We are lucky to have reserved the same table, or with this crowd——"

Her words were lost in the hum and buzz around them, but Margot watched her recede in company with three others, one of whom was an Indian, another Marigold, and the third an unknown man.

For awhile her heart seemed to stand still, for Peter's back was turned, and though he faced one of the great mirrors that lined the wall, he had been busy reading an advertisement of the many facilities offered by the restaurant which, in the form of a card, adorned every tea-table.

Peter did not know that Marigold and Min were in the hall—or that they were in the company of two men, one of whom was an Indian. Should she tell him?

Whether or not to tell him made havoc of her mind for the few minutes following her discovery. If Marigold was up to mischief and had been so employed for some time, it would be better for Peter's happiness not to know it. She would speak to Marigold sternly and bring her to her senses. Was she mad?—or bad? What was the matter with her that she should deceive Peter, one of God's good men! Her heart ached furiously for Peter while she made a pretence of conversation, speaking at random and allowing Peter to read out the advertisement for her benefit.

The band struck up a noisy foxtrot with all its varied accompaniments that rent the air, making conversation rise to meet it on the tide of effort like the roar of an express train, while couples revolved on the parquet floor in response to the whip of the rhythm.

"Shall we dance now?" asked Peter.

"Let us have tea first," said Margot, trembling as she thought of coming face to face with Marigold and the man she was now dancing with, who held her close, and with lips touching her ear, whispered continuously, the look on his face an insult to Peter.

At all costs Peter must not see that. It would be terrible if Peter saw Marigold lift her eyes to her partner's face with that coquettish glance of conscious allurements. Marigold was flirting desperately. Margot could not doubt it, and was sick with shame for her. For the next few minutes she watched her beautiful sister with mixed emotions, her own beautiful eyes a shocked protest to such disloyal conduct, and Peter, reading them, immediately followed her gaze, she lost to all but those two syncopating figures, the two faces so near together, and the encouragement on Marigold's face.

They danced as one, her form pressed to his; their faces so near that, as he stooped and whispered, there were times when his lips all but brushed her cheek. That the man was devoured with passion for her, could not be

doubted, and Marigold was therefore in her element provoking him in the glare of publicity to dare as much as possible within the limits of propriety.

Many couples intervened, so that she lost sight of Marigold and, as frequently, found Min dancing with the Indian, who seemed to take a profound satisfaction in all the liberties afforded by the dance. He held her to him just as close as the Englishmen about him held their partners, and gazed into her face with bovine complacency and the assurance of one who had no doubt of his right to paw her with his dusky hands. Margot hotly resented the sight of Min in the arms of this turbanned Indian, whose dark eyes and sensual lips hinted of licentiousness and self-indulgence. How dare he dance with Min?

Yet, if he was one of the guests she had met at Moreton Gadsby, he must be a gentleman by birth and accustomed to being treated on an equality with English people. Was she becoming hypersensitive and unduly suspicious? Perhaps she was misjudging Marigold?

Peter was ordering the tea. His voice sounded strained and peculiar. How glad she was that he was diverted for the moment and not watching the dancers.

She said nothing when he swung round and, shading his eyes with one hand while his elbow was supported on the back of his chair, began to look on. She felt as if living on a mine that might at any moment explode.

There was Marigold returning to her table with her partner in close attendance on her, his hand on her arm, her face lifted to his, a pair of languishing blue eyes speaking to him of unutterable things. The four sat down to tea. The business of tea-making fell to Min, who seemed to have arrogated to herself the position of hostess. All four seemed on familiar terms by the rapid give and take, the laughter, and the subtle familiarities.

She suddenly became aware that Peter was also watching them, and her seething emotions made her almost dizzy. She could imagine how wretched he must be feeling. How was he going to bear it? Could he doubt that Marigold was on very familiar terms, indeed, with the man beside her, who once covered her hand with his as it rested on

the table, emphasising a remark he made in fierce earnestness? She was openly leading him on—laughing at him, pouting childishly, smiling coquettishly, raising and dropping her lids, stealing sidelong looks full of meaning. It was a phase of Marigold which Margot had not yet been privileged to see, and it gave her a feeling of tightness at the heart, knowing, as she did, that Peter was also watching her.

At last Peter resolutely turned his back, and at the same moment Margot feverishly started tea-making.

"Who are those people?" said he, playing with his teaspoon.

"I don't know," said Margot, in the depths of shame.

"Did Marigold say nothing about them?"

"I suppose they are Min's friends."

"She has been going about a lot with Min, lately?"

Margot made no reply, for how could she say that never had Marigold and Min been on such sisterly terms of affection, or been about so much together as of late.

Peter sipped his tea with a look in his eyes that Margot could not bear to see. Presently he said:

"If you don't care about staying on, we might as well go."

Margot agreed, and he called the waiter. When he had settled the bill, Margot saw that his hand was unsteady and that he was looking white and ill. The band burst out again into a measure equally tuneless and pagan, during which Peter almost led the way out, safe from observation in the movements around him as people streamed towards the floor.

They were very silent as Peter drove through the traffic without any definite purpose in view. On, on, they drove, and when clear of crowded streets into the undulating park at Wimbledon, he said quietly and unexpectedly:

"Thank you, Margot, for not speaking to me."

"Oh, what could I say? I am so sorry—so—unhappy about this."

"Don't worry," said he, gently. "I have tried to think it out, and I have come to the conclusion that I mustn't



judge by appearances. One's imagination—badly biased—is apt to lead one astray. Poor Marigold was having a good time. She can't help looking lovely, and it is being unreasonable to expect her not to look the sweetest, most desirable thing on earth. She has a little way——" his voice was inexpressibly tender. "It's part of herself. She can no more help it than breathing. It isn't her fault that every jackanapes falls in love and thinks he can impress her. It is up to her to tell him she's engaged, and I dare say she will, if she hasn't already. After all, when a fellow falls in love with a girl so pretty and attractive as Marigold he has to put up with this sort of thing—bees and the honey-pot—eh?" and he tried to laugh. Poor Peter! Margot could have wept.

How loyal, how faithful! What magnificent trust! He would rather doubt the evidence of his own eyes than this worthless girl he loved and wanted above all others in the world.

Not knowing how to answer him, Margot smiled sympathetically and said that she could not imagine that Marigold could possibly have meant to do anything wrong.

"Tell me as you did to-day, that Marigold loves me. Say, that for my sake, she will play the game." What a boy he was! looking straight before him with lips that quivered and wet eyes.

"Peter dear," burst from Margot. "I am *sure* Marigold loves you. How could she help it!—she cannot but love you for all your faith and trust—your utter unselfishness—your goodness to her. Of course, she *must* play the game."

His hand left the wheel for a moment to press hers gratefully, he then turned the car homeward. His day was utterly spoiled for him. It was torture for him to sit beside anyone and make conversation. He wanted to be alone with his thoughts so as to build up a defence for Marigold, whose conduct was indefensible. Margot guessed it all, and her heart bled for him.

## CHAPTER XVIII

## IN CHAINS

WHILE Margot, accompanied by Peter, was making her distressing discovery concerning Marigold's treachery, Megan had no less an exciting afternoon.

The entire family having made engagements with the exception of herself, it was her opportunity to make what was known to them all as 'a field day' of it, and put the kitchen into order. She was only too glad to find occupation for her mind and fingers so as not to fall into the Slough of Despond that had once threatened to engulf her; so she settled down to work on the gas stove which Mrs. Grabbitt's perfunctory notions of cleaning had left caked with grease and burnt milk. Milk was the one thing that defied watching and could be relied upon to overflow at the boil, the moment her back was turned. It was disgusting, and Megan submerged the burners in a pail of hot water and soda, and was hard at work brushing the metal with a wire sponge when she distinctly heard a knock at the flat door.

As she was in no state to receive visitors, she determined to make no sign. Whoever had called would retire if, after a few efforts to attract attention, nothing happened. Her rubber gloves were blackened, her apron was splashed and discoloured, there was a smut on one of her cheeks which she could almost see by squinting, so there was no hope that she could possibly interview any of her mother's or Marigold's friends even through a crack in the door.

She did not know however that the landlady had let in the visitor into the main hall, and Margot having neglected in her excitement to fasten the door of the flat effectively, it had opened in the caller's hand.

"Are you sure Miss Sheridan is in?"

"I am quite sure, sir," said the landlady, offering to enter and announce him, for she had no doubt as to his respectability which his immaculate and very striking appearance made impossible to question. Moreover, he had announced himself as an old friend of the family.

"No need, if she's in. I'll call and she'll hear me."

"Miss Megan is in, right enough, for I saw her through the back busy in the kitchen, which she do keep wonderful for one as has never 'ad to work in her life, sir."

"Oh, I know that. All the others out?" Which was evidently a matter of satisfaction to him, the landlady would have noticed, if she had been less concerned with her ironing in the basement, and the flat-iron using more gas than was prudent.

"All gone out, sir, even Mrs. Cowen, as was an invalid not so long ago, neither."

The door closed behind him and he entered the sitting-room, once familiar ground, and looked about him. No one in sight, but sounds of scraping and splashing from somewhere.

He returned to the passage and explored, directed to the kitchen behind the staircase, by the sounds proceeding therefrom.

Megan, listening to footsteps, concluded that a member of the family must have returned, but when a knock sounded on the kitchen door, she called out, "Come in," expecting to see the landlady, who had access to the flat from the back door.

To her amazement, she looked up presently to see framed in the scullery door—Rolly Sherwell, hat in hand, the dandy he always looked, and wearing a deprecating smile on his attractive face.

"Who in the world said you could come in here?" she breathed, thoroughly taken aback and feeling weak at the knees.

Under any circumstances, meeting Rolly Sherwell would have been an ordeal hard to face. But to be caught in such a plight was unspeakably embarrassing.

"You said 'Come in', so I came," he replied innocently, the twinkle she well remembered glinting mischievously

in his eyes as they dwelt on her face with the smut, the dishcloth as a turban on her head.

"But—how—how *could* you! I—I wouldn't have said it if I had dreamt it was *you*." Megan, always so composed, was on the brink of tears. The humiliation of it! The disgusting sight she knew she presented, and he, standing there actually smiling—making fun of her in his mind. It was unbearable! "Please go away. I cannot see you—*now*, or—or any time. Please go—go!" And she dashed to a small mirror over the gas stove in the scullery and tried to efface the smut.

"Don't, Megan. Please let me stay——"

"How dare you think I would see you?—much less here?"

"Anywhere would be good enough for me. What's wrong with the kitchen and scullery? I have seen such places before, and take off my hat to those who slog in them, a thankless job! Come—get rid of those gloves."

Something in his voice made Megan tug at the gloves and tear off the apron, trembling as she did so from head to foot. "You had no right to come at all—I did not say you could. I did not want to see you——"

"Stop being rude to me, Megan. I can't stand it. You will make me cry."

"How dare you make fun of me?"

"I'm very far from making fun of you. I want to be forgiven. Will you forgive me, Megan, and take me back?" A quiver in his voice and his earnestness forced her to regard him seriously, and the next instant he had hold of her hands. "Megan! I've been a dam' fool, and curse myself for chasing around after Marigold when I wasn't even in love with her. I never was—'honest to God!' It was a crazy interlude, and no one more fed-up than I. Look here, Megan"—pulling her into his arms and kissing the remains of the smut on her cheek—"I love you. Do you believe me? Why should I come like this if I didn't love you and want you like hell?"

Megan looked into his eyes and wept on his shoulder. For a while it was heavenly, and she was translated with

hope and happiness, feeling that she could no longer hold out against her heart.

"Forgiven me?" he asked, having deposited his hat on a bread platter regardless of damage to its spotless crown.

"I—I suppose so. You make it impossible for me to refuse."

"And now, about getting married." He sat down on a wooden chair and drew her on his knee, neither of them seeing anything incongruous in making love in such unromantic conditions with Megan afraid that she was looking a fright, dressed in her worst, and not even externally clean. Her face—her hands—goodness gracious! Never had Megan's face looked so confused and shy for the eldest daughter of the family. And to think that Rolly of all people—it was unthinkable! But what was he talking about? Getting married?

The full blast of realisation came upon her with that word. What was the use of saying anything about it? How could she dream of marriage now, with all her responsibilities? Nevertheless, she listened to him speaking. He was telling her in honest, straightforward fashion of his circumstances. How he proposed to live in future. He wasn't by any means terribly well off, but he could manage to support a wife, and who better could he choose than Megan, whom he had always admired and respected above all other women? He thought she had been a brick to her family, and he cursed the day he had allowed his fancy—it was only that—to wander in Marigold's direction. However, it had not lasted long, for he had sized her up over the man Timpson, who, she believed, was a millionaire—his fault for deceiving her, but he couldn't resist it—and, from that moment, he had seen just how the land lay. He had seen nothing of Timpson at all for a long time, but he hoped that Marigold would not let Peter Dunbar down, for he was a truly fine fellow.

"We'll take a little house somewhere near London, so that I can run in to town for business and out of it when I want to be with my wife. Good God! to think of the time I've wasted"; and Megan suffered his kisses while

the utter impossibility of marriage for her stared her in the face.

"It's no good, Rolly!" she cried, dejectedly. "No good whatever."

"You don't mean——?"

"I do."

"Don't want to marry me?"

"I do—I *do*!"

"Then I won't listen to any objections."

"It is only that I cannot throw the family over. Marigold is going to marry, but there is Min and Mother. They are entirely dependent on Margot and me. Our income supports them, and as we can't afford a servant all the week, I have to run everything and cook. Can you imagine what they would do if I got married and cleared out?"

"They'd have to manage somehow."

"On what? If I married, I'd need all my own money to help out. I couldn't do without it unless you got rich. But that is not so, and they can't do without me, and it; so that's how I am placed."

"But—it's not to be allowed for a minute. You have sacrificed yourself all down the line. Must you also sacrifice your happiness—your very life—to them?"

They argued for a long time on this side and that, for and against, without coming any nearer a solution of the difficulty. Megan could see no way out of her prison. Her mother could not get on at all without her and her little income. It was the same for Margot. Unless she married riches, she could not marry at all, for the family depended just as much on her as on Megan. So there it was.

"Think," said Megan. "Mummy hasn't a bean but what she realised out of jewellery that she sold, and she's fast getting through it, as she has no more idea of the value of money than Marigold and Min. They take after her. If I turned my back on her, she'd be a pauper."

Rolly felt like saying, "Give her a taste of it. It will do her good", but it was just what proper feeling made impossible to say of Megan's mother.

"She never grudged us anything while my stepfather lived. We had the same as his children and every advantage

of education and accomplishments, according to our talents. We could not desert her and see her drift to a house of charity. And Min. Angry as I feel with her, she is my sister, and I *have* to see her through till she gets a home of her own. You see, Rolly, it is absolutely impossible. We'll have to say good-bye," and her head went down till it rested on his, and she wept hopelessly. A sight of her soft, yielding form and bowed head would have been a revelation to her stepsisters, who had never known Megan as she was, or guessed how feminine was her nature, with its human sympathies and yearnings.

It was heartbreaking. Yet it would have to be good-bye—finally and irrevocably—for she did not think, for a moment, that her mother would marry again. Widows of her age, however prepossessing, if they were penniless, had no chance of winning a husband in open competition with fresh, lively young girls who were to be had for the asking. No; Mrs. Cowen was a charge on her for life, and if only Rolly had been well off, he could have provided for her and Min too, at least, till Marigold and Min got married, when the sons-in-law could have subscribed towards her support. But there was no hope. Peter was hard up; Rolly just on his feet; and neither Margot nor Min had any idea of getting married. Min was, moreover, too young.

As there was nothing more to be said about it, and as seeing each other was only likely to keep up the heart-ache, Megan pulled herself together, and drove Rolly away.

"Go, Rolly—go! It is no use. I've just got to stick it. Ask yourself if you could possibly expect me to make any other decision. And don't try to come again; it will only make things all the harder for me."

Rolly, however, was not in the mood to see her point. He would have liked to have drowned the family—all but Margot, for whom he had a soft corner.

"Look here, Megan," he cried, producing what he thought was his trump card. "I can't carry on as a bachelor any longer. I'm not cut out for the life, whatever people may think. I've got to settle down and marry; so if you turn me down I'll go right out and ask the first

girl who will have me. I don't for a moment say I shall ever care for her. But I'm for a domestic life, and if you throw me over it will have to be anybody. My landlady's daughter isn't a bad sort." The twinkle had returned to his eyes while he stated his case.

"Marry whom you please," said Megan, removing herself to a distance. "If you can be so easily satisfied——"

"If one can't get the best, it is as well to take second-best."

"Good-bye, Rolly. No—don't kiss me."

"It isn't good-bye, and I shall kiss you, and *be* kissed." With that he snatched her into his arms and kissed her long and passionately, after which he let himself out of the flat, leaving Megan inert and paralysed with grief. She had sent her one lover—the only man in the world for her—away, and had forbidden him to come again. He was free to take another girl to wife, and all chance of happiness was lost for ever.

Margot returned to find her lying white and stricken in bed. As once before, she had collapsed physically and mentally, and having restored order to the kitchen, left the others to carry on as best they might. "I can't help it," she said to Margot. "You reach a certain point and can go no farther. Rolly came to-day and I have asked him not to come again. Don't argue with me. It is the end."

"Did he agree to that?"

"He had no option. I could have turned my back on everyone and married him any day—as soon as I liked—but what would become of Mummy? Who is to provide for Min? It seems our job, and we've got to see it through."

Margot sat down and pondered it resentfully, for Megan's sake. For herself, she felt no vocation to get a husband.

There wasn't a man, she told herself, whom she would take were he to ask her, as the only man she could love with all her heart and all her soul belonged to Marigold.

Marigold and Min arrived after dark, seen home by their escorts in a car the like of which the Crescent had never before seen. As it was an off-evening for Marigold, Peter being engaged to dine at a club function of special importance, she lent her services to the kitchen to help Margot



with supper. Min, observing that too many in the kitchen could only trip each other up in the small space, went to the floor above to make Lucy envious with tales of her success. She no longer felt inclined to join in the little adventures of last year, which meant so much to two emancipated flappers. She had outgrown such futile entertainments and was now beginning to live.

In the seclusion of the kitchen Margot had it out with Marigold, but in a very different fashion from other times when it had been necessary to speak her mind. She repressed all inclination to storm at her, realising the impotence of hammer and tongs. The issues were far too grave, and no good could come of quarrelling in the old noisy way. Marigold must be made to realise the danger of disloyalty, and all that her actions might yet be responsible for.

"You forget," she said, her eyes large with dread, "what happened in the case of Bobby. Would you repeat it with Peter?"

"There wasn't anything in it, Margot. You make mountains out of mole hills," said Marigold, temperately. "I was only having a little fun."

"How often have you done this sort of thing lately?"

"A good few times. When there wasn't anything better to do and Peter wasn't free till late."

"And those night engagements with Min?"

"When Peter went to Hove, or dined out with those people with whom he was doing business, I naturally made my own engagements. He knew I went out with friends."

"He did not know who they were. He trusted you."

"If he had asked me, I would have told him."

"The whole truth?"

"There isn't anything to tell," Marigold persisted. "Surely I could be trusted to go out with a party to *thé dansants*, or a night club, and my own sister of the party?"

"I am terribly afraid you aren't looking after Min if you are countenancing her flirtation with an Indian."

"Min listens to no one, and if you pull one way, she will go the other. All I can do is to see she comes to no

harm. What did Peter say?" Marigold was most concerned with how Peter took the discovery of her dancing with an unknown man.

"I know that he is desperately hurt. He doesn't say much, but I hope never to see that look in his eyes again."

"Is he angry with me?"—nervously.

"Do you love Peter?"

"Of *course* I do. I feel for him what I never will feel for any other man, but"—she turned her face aside—"the truth is—I'm not Peter's sort. He never should have got engaged to me."

"Marigold! If you can speak like that, you can't care for him. You can't! How can you think of making him suffer so?"

Silence.

"Is it that you are cooling off?"

Marigold began to cry, her face in her elbow on the kitchen table. "I—I don't know what I feel like. Sometimes I want to marry him, and at other times I feel that I cannot live the life he wants me to!"

"Good God!" Margot suffered a species of panic.

"Do you mean to say you are now wavering when you made him give up Malaya for you, lose a lot of money, start a business and plan where to live! Marigold!" She knelt beside the weeping girl and laid an arm about her shoulders persuasively. "This is only a passing phase. I don't believe it will last. Pull yourself together, Marigold, for you know you love Peter—poor, dear Peter, with his heart of gold, his loving nature, and his faith in you. You know you love him, Marigold. Oh, for pity-sake don't let him down! Think of what it will mean to him if you now back out. It is inconceivable. You cannot dream of hurting him so?—of spoiling his life."

"That's what upsets me so. I feel as if a net were closing round me. If I marry him, nothing will be the same again. I will have to be like Megan—keep house, and I know I never shall be able. I hate the idea of it. Then, the same old stint and screw for money! It will be from the frying-pan into the fire, and I can't bear to think of it. I want to run away every time I see the sort of flat Peter says he

can afford, and it is like a prison to me." She wept passionately.

"Oh, Marigold!" was all Margot could say, sitting back on her heels and contemplating the heaving shoulders.

The sound of a familiar hooter at the gate checked Marigold's tears on the instant. She sprang up in excitement, saying, "It's Peter! Why has he come?"

They heard Peter's knock, and Margot caught the tearful beauty by the shoulders and looked steadily into her drowned eyes. "He's rushed here, out of his way, to see you, though he is dining out. He will need reassuring. Marigold, be good to him. Remember Bobby!"

Marigold let Peter in with the sweetest smiles, and flung herself into his arms.

The unexpected joy of such a welcome disarmed Peter completely, and made him speechless except for terms of endearment.

"I came because I *had* to see you. Did Margot tell you?"—when he felt able to trust himself to words. "I've suffered hell."

"She did, and oh, what a fuss about nothing, Peter dear! I was bored stiff all the afternoon. Why didn't you come and take me away? I wanted to get rid of that man all the time, and you went away, instead"—reproachfully.

"I was afraid you would have hated intrusion. But it's sweet of you to say you wanted me." And he strained her to him. "Sweetheart, you have been crying!"—looking deep into her eyes.

"I should think I would cry when you and Margot thought such horrid things of me!"

"Not horrid—never! I was only terrified—torn to pieces thinking you were, perhaps—tired of me. Are you?"

"Oh, Peter!" and she made ample amends for all he had been made to suffer at her hands. "I love you, Peter. Whatever happens I shall never love anyone quite in the same way as I love you."

It was heavenly to hear her say "I love you, Peter", and Peter was as happy as he had been miserable, kissing away her tears and reproaching himself for ever having doubted her love and good faith. "Good night, my precious.

I've got to rush away—that dinner—I wish I hadn't to go! Good night."

He ran back to his car, treading on air, and Marigold returned to the kitchen with shining eyes. "Peter is a darling," said she, looking herself again. "I have only to see him to know how much I do love him. I wish—I wish . . ."

Margot waited, but as she did not complete her sentence, "What do you wish?"

"I wish I wasn't so afraid."

"What are you afraid of?"

"Afraid of *everything*," Marigold replied evasively. "Afraid I shall hate it after I have been married a month. Afraid of wishing I hadn't been in a hurry. Afraid that poverty and I cannot agree. Afraid that Peter will get fed-up with me one day, and see me with other eyes."

"That will be up to you. If you are sincere, and make him a good wife, he'll not love you less, but more."

Margot's heart echoed Marigold's fears, and she grieved for Peter. One day, he was bound to see Marigold as she really was, and not as he thought her, and then, God help him if it was too late to save his happiness!"

"Who is the man you were dancing with, Marigold?"

"He's an American from Los Angeles—all 'Gosh' and 'Gee'. His accent amuses me, and I 'tickle him to death'. But oh he's *rich*!"

"Mr. Timpson was a millionaire from Texas. Don't forget."

"Mr. Hoffmann is different. He's tremendously well-known in the film world, and is over here shooting pictures for one of his talkies. He says our English voices carry better than theirs, and are a gold mine to producers."

"Then he's a producer?"

"A director in the Stella Meteoric Film Corporation, and owns most of the shares."

"Where and how did you get to know him?"

"How curious you are! But don't be alarmed. I did not 'pick him up', but was introduced by Prince Oolookibeta."

"Prince—*what*?"

Marigold burst out laughing, then repeated the name, adding that Min met the Indian at Mrs. Legge's and that he happens to be staying at the same hotel as the American. The prince was a relative of the Rajah who married Lilian Legge.

"I don't at all like Min being friendly with him."

"Nor do I," said Marigold, "but who's going to stop her?"

"Megan must. Min will say I tattled, but it is my duty to tell Megan if Mummy has no authority. At least, it is better than letting her go her own way like an ignorant fool and at an age when she cannot know her own mind."

"Then don't let Min know I said anything, but she imagines herself in love, and he means business. I don't know what will happen, especially with Lilian's example before her eyes, and Lilian has written to say that she is living in Calcutta in a palatial house, with an army of servants and a high-powered Chrysler to run her around. She has refused to live in the country with his family and crowds of female dependents and ex-wives, so he has made her a huge allowance and visits her in town. To Min, that's the pinnacle of achievement, since Lilian is free to give parties and her house is always full of men. Mrs. Legge doesn't know what to make of it all, but I always knew that Lilian was fast."

"I'll tell Megan," said Margot.

## CHAPTER XIX

### PROSPECTS

MEGAN seemed to welcome the diversion of a tussle of wills with the flapper, and forthwith rose from bed to do instant battle on the subject of the Indian Prince. Anything was better than nursing the ache and longing within her.

Mrs. Cowen arrived in the midst of the argument, and

gave way to hysteria at the revelation of her child's deceit. That one so pampered and indulged should be so ungrateful as to deceive those near and dear to her, showed that her youngest-born was on the road to perdition.

"Why didn't you tell me? Am I not a sympathetic parent? Could I not have advised you for your good?" she sobbed.

"I jolly well knew what would happen if I said anything at all," returned Min.

"At least, it could all have been above-board, and he asked to the house——"

"Not if I knew it," interposed Megan. "I should never have countenanced Min carrying on with an Indian, prince or coolie, whatever he is!"

"What is it to you?" screamed Min, furiously.

"It's my house, and——"

"I never knew I should live to have you throw it up to me that I and mine are homeless!" Mrs. Cowen wept. "Oh, oh, oh!"

"Stick to the point, Mummy!" cried Margot, impatiently. "Do you approve of Min having an Indian as her lover?"

"A black man!" cried Megan angrily.

"How can you be so prejudiced!" cried Mrs. Cowen. "He did not make himself, and all men are alike in the sight of God."

"Do you want Eurasian grandchildren?" persisted Margot, whose pride of race was inherent.

"You'll have a piebald family," sneered Megan, glaring at Min.

"I'll not stand this. I'll get out."

"Don't be a fool," said Marigold. "It's just that you have lost your head and want to be called 'Princess'!"

Min turned on her for not taking her part, and withered her with a blast from her tongue. She would have them all know that Marigold was no better than herself, for she was carrying on with Mr. Hoffmann, the American, who did not even know she was engaged—wearing her engagement ring on her right hand not to give herself away, and letting him make hot love to her in the back seat of his

car! If Peter knew the half of what she was up to, he'd drop her like a bad potato.

"Don't be too sure," sneered Marigold.

"Let me have a word with him!" cried the little virago.

"You dare! He knows you for a liar."

"He'll believe the evidence of his own eyes."

And Marigold, remembering the letter Min treasured, collapsed in a corner and contributed nothing further to the quarrel. In the meantime, Mrs. Cowen had to be given smelling-salts and helped to bed between Megan and Margot, who apologised humbly for upsetting her.

It always finished rows in the family when Mrs. Cowen created an illogical diversion of the argument and had a heart attack if it carried her out of her depths. A seizure genuine or assumed, called a truce.

Later on, angry feelings subsided, and everyone supped, with Megan again in charge, having recovered her balance and the power to fight the world in the cause of duty; strained relations maintained between herself and the culprit.

In bed, that night, Megan confided to Margot the necessity to arrange something that would keep Min out of harm's way for a bit. There was Min's old nurse married to a farmer in Kent. She could be asked to have her on a visit, but she'd have to be paid. What did Margot suggest? Could she manage to meet half the expense?

Margot, who had cleared Marigold's debt for the opera cloak and just saved enough money to pay Peter the five pounds she insisted was due to him, suffered a shock. It seemed she was fated to owe Peter that money, and her proud soul irked the burden.

"I hate to think he paid all that for me when he hasn't any money to spare."

"But that's absurd! He has forgotten all about it and refused to allow that it was anyone's affair but his."

"What's to prevent this Indian chasing Min down there?"

"Nothing. But I shall see him and forbid it. I can't do more, and Mrs. Nettlebush can be trusted to look after the proprieties."

"She'll have her hands full."

"Still—I *must* find the money to pay Peter. It has been on my conscience all this time," Margot concluded, wondering what Megan would say if she knew how Marigold had dissipated the sum she had entrusted to her for Peter. Or what Peter would think of Marigold's sense of honour if he heard the story of the opera cloak.

Next morning, when Megan took her mother her breakfast in bed, an established custom at the flat, Mrs. Cowen broke the news to her that she had come to the end of her bank account and was in urgent need of twenty pounds.

"What for?" cried Megan, sinking down on the edge of the bed with a feeling of collapse. "What *ever* have you done with the hundred pounds you had in reserve for sickness and clothes?"

Mrs. Cowen had the grace to look apologetic, though the money was entirely her own to do with as she pleased.

"It is surprising how quickly the money goes," she explained. "You know how a pound vanishes the moment it is changed. Things are so expensive, and—don't forget!—I had to supply Min's needs, and the way she goes through footwear is appalling! Also, she is so fastidious about her shoes. But I can't blame her. I am so myself. I simply can't wear any kind of shoe, and——"

"But, Mummy," expostulated Megan. "Where is the money to come from?"

Mrs. Cowen looked pathetic and despairing.

"We can't coin it. But, surely, you haven't spent a hundred pounds in this little while only on shoes and odds and ends? For you both were well set up before Christmas."

"My darling! That was *winter*, and this is *spring*! One has to get suitable things. You don't seem to care what you wear, and Margot is actually quite old-fashioned—almost dowdy, I say, if you compare her with Marigold and Min. However, I have had some unexpected charges lately which gave me such a shock, I lost my appetite for the whole of yesterday over it."

"What charges? You haven't to pay anything towards the house."



"I know—I know. You needn't rub that in, my child. I always said that you and Margot are wonderful daughters to me. This is a personal matter entirely—in fact, a bridge debt. I never realised that shilling points in contract could run one up like that. Usually it works out level at the end of every month. Being a private club, we have monthly accounts, and last month I squared, but for a few shillings to the good. But somehow, lately, I must have been a steady loser. Really, I feel dreadful about it, and don't know what to do unless I sell that pearl necklace of Marigold's. It seems the only thing to do"—plaintively.

"You have been gambling when you know you can't afford to lose?" Megan was in despair.

"My dear, when does anyone play bridge for love? I'd have to give it up altogether, and seeing that it is the only recreation I have, I don't think you should grudge your mother so small a thing."

"I don't grudge you anything, but——"

"Besides, one often wins. Mrs. Cartwright paid all her expenses in Rome by her bridge winnings. She couldn't have gone if it hadn't been for her luck in bridge. The question is, not whether you or anyone approve, or disapprove, darling. But how I am to meet this bill. It is more important that I should pay it than if it had been merely a tradesman's account, for——"

"There is no difference. It's an account you *owe*."

"A very large difference. A card debt is a debt of honour——"

"So is a tradesman's."

"You do nothing but argue. A debt of honour is one you feel *obliged* to pay because you cannot be run in, can't you see that? A tradesman can sue you, and you have to pay or go bankrupt, while a card debt, unpaid, brands you as dishonourable, and you are not eligible to join a club——"

"I can't go into these social quibbles. All I want to know is, where is it going to end? And how do you propose to pay these 'debts of honour' when you have no income?"

"That is just what is giving me sleepless nights and

interfering with my appetite. I counted all the hours till three o'clock last night, I was so rattled over Min's Indian and my bridge debt. There is nothing for it but to sell the pearl necklace."

Megan could scarcely command her voice to speak temperately, she felt so annoyed with her weak-minded parent whom the catechism had told her she must honour, if she wanted to live 'long in the land', et cetera.

"Get that idea clean out of your head. I never meant to tell you the truth, but you might as well know now that Marigold did you down on that necklace. If you imagine it is worth a lot of money, you will take advantage of it to continue gambling——"

"Bridge is not gambling. But how do you mean that Marigold—'did me down'? What a dreadful thing to say! You always had a bad opinion of that poor child. I am sure she wouldn't grudge me the money if I sold that necklace——"

"Oh, do listen. You never take things in!" And Megan related the story of the necklace, which could no longer be hidden from Mrs. Cowen's knowledge.

The result was another heart attack, and one so genuinely alarming that Megan did not know what to do. Margot had breakfasted early and gone to work, Min was not to be found, and Marigold was in her bath. It was almost an offence to hear her splashing at her leisure while the air escaping with steam through the chinks of the door was heavily perfumed with some fashionable bath salts.

Megan banged on the panels, telling her to come out.

"I couldn't—please spare my blushes," was the retort.

Megan continued to pound on the door. "Mummy is ill—go and 'phone for a doctor. I can't stay a minute."

"What's that you say?"

Megan rushed away, poured out an overflowing dose of sal volatile and coerced her mother into drinking it between her heavy gasps and futile cries for help. Like a drowning woman she panted, her eyes starting from their sockets, her fingers clutching at her silken nightdress, which she tore in her struggle to breathe.

"Don't—don't! Mummy! Mummy! Lie still—be calm—you'll be all right presently."

"Give me—that medicine—there!" Mrs. Cowen pointed to her dressing-table. "Small phial—tablets." Her eyes rolled horribly, and Megan thought every moment would be her last.

On the dressing-table was a small phial containing tablets, and Megan saw on the label that two could be swallowed in an emergency. This was an emergency, if ever there was one. She put two in her mother's mouth, horrified at the livid lips and ashen skin. Never had she witnessed such a seizure in her life—and no one had dreamed that anything so serious was wrong with her mother.

Gradually the colour returned and the breathing became less painful. White and exhausted, Mrs. Cowen's head fell back on her pillow and her eyes closed. Megan wrung her hands and sobbed. Was she dying? Would she never speak again?

"Oh, my God!" she kissed her mother's cheek again and again. "Forgive me if I was harsh. Oh, forgive me! I never knew—I didn't mean——"

Just then Marigold put her head in at the door.

"Did you want me for anything?" her silvery voice asked, a radiant kimono of Japanese silk wrapped about her gleaming form in place of a bath towel or garment, the sleeves dangling useless, while the atmosphere surrounding her was redolent of a delicious perfume. Even Megan subconsciously registered the impression of intriguing loveliness.

"Phone for the doctor at once. *Hurry!*"

"What's happened? Mummy bad?"—eyes dilated in fear.

"Do as you're told, and lose no time!" snapped Megan, chafing her mother's hands, hope reviving at sight of the colour slowly returning to the pallid cheeks.

"She's dying! She is dying!" Marigold rushed from the room panic-stricken, holding her garment in place as she ran to the sitting-room through communicating doors, scarcely knowing what she was about. "Phone for a

doctor", Megan had said, but there was no 'phone! She wasn't dressed, and the only telephone was upstairs at a neighbour's. What was she to do? Her mother looked dying—but it couldn't be possible. She had only fainted—surely, surely?—like so many other times, and they had ceased to attach any real importance to her attacks.

Death was something inconceivably dreadful, and not to be thought of in connection with anyone near and dear. It came to others—not to them. . . .

She ran back to her room wondering how she could dress all in a minute so as to telephone—dressing was never a thing that could be done in a hurry, and she could not run up the stairs in next to nothing!

Suddenly there was a knock at the door of the flat. *Peter?* . . . Thank God! He was to call and take her for breakfast in the country. After that—flat-hunting. What did she care how undressed she was before Peter! He'd love her best so! Running to open the door, she could not resist glancing at her reflection in the mantelpiece-mirror which gave back the picture she expected to see. One she believed was fit for the Royal Academy if only an artist had been at hand to paint it. A soft halo of golden hair round a face of pink and white, flower-like beauty; one hand holding the refractory garment in place over gleaming flesh and moulded curves. No time for details. She was even indifferent concerning them, since it was Peter, and she knew her ground with him. Quickly she opened the door to him.

"Peter! Peter!" before he could recover his faculties, her face alive with dramatic horror—"Mummy is dying! Mummy is *dying*! Telephone to the doctor—*quick*!"

"His number?—do you know it?" Peter wasted no time in questions.

Marigold gave it from memory, then stopped to verify it from a pigeon-hole in Megan's desk, one hand clinging to the slipping kimono.

Peter was gone in a moment, taking with him a bewildering sense of having dreamed a dream of divine perfection while the scent of perfumed bath-salts lingered in his nostrils to tantalise imagination. Fresh from her

bath, she had flown to answer his knock. Her mother was desperately ill. Dying? Affections were stronger than every other consideration. Marigold had proved the single-heartedness of her nature. His beautiful—beautiful girl!

It was not possible for Peter to be quite his calm, normal self for the rest of the day while following Marigold meekly through untenanted rooms and comparing the rival merits of localities. All he knew was that they were to be married about midsummer, and it was too long to wait.

"I think we'll take this flat, darling," she said, looking out of a bay window on a square where elms and maples were fast springing into verdure and a gardener was dragging a heavy roller on a strip of green lawn. The main road could be glimpsed through gaps in the houses opposite, with its never-ceasing roar and the varied noises of motor horns occasionally harmonising. There was less uniformity in the architecture of the buildings, and the possession of a balcony was impossible to resist. "You are right in the midst of things. If you want to go shopping, you've only to put on a hat and walk round the corner, so to speak. You will find it so restful, too, looking out on a green square instead of on bricks and mortar. As for this balcony. Only think! We might get it glazed in and turn it into a conservatory. It will be very narrow, but green and artistic. I can just imagine how lovely we can make it with flowers and palms. This is ideal. Don't you love it?"

Peter was in the mood to love anything so long as he was allowed to share it with her. Perhaps the bedroom was too small, and the dressing-room a mere pill-box. He refrained from commenting on the kitchen and offices, as they were outside his sphere. But the bedroom! He returned to the threshold and looked over it again, rubbing his chin doubtfully.

"It will take a double bed if it isn't too wide," said she, determined not to sacrifice her ideal sitting-room for the sake of a trifle. "I never take much space, and if you don't mind my cuddling close, I don't."

"Mind?" Peter pulled her into his arms, and after

that there was nothing to be said—not even concerning the rent, which was far above his expectations. After all, it was as well to be an optimist, for it took one further than the other thing.

"You'll not change your mind, Peter?" she urged, as they drove to the house agent's. "It will be this flat, and no other?"

"I am not given that way. You should know by now that it takes a lot to make me change once I get set on anything."

"You are the sort that makes a girl feel panicky on the eve of getting married," said Marigold, with a nervous laugh.

"Why do you say that?"

"You're so terribly *good*, Peter. So wonderfully perfect and unlike most men one meets. Your standards are so high one is bound to fall short of them. I'm so afraid I'll die trying to live up to them."

Peter was silent, feeling a sudden tightening of the heart. What was she driving at? How could she say anything so hurtful?

"I don't understand," said he, eyes darkening with fear.

Marigold laughed queerly. "I was only thinking you ought to have a chance of backing out in time. It would only be fair to you, for you really don't know if it will be a success—marrying *me*."

Peter ran the car to the kerb and, regardless of the passing traffic, seized her two hands in a grip, while his eyes searched her face.

"Why are you talking like this? Marigold—if you are anxious to be rid of me, say so, now, and I'll—quit. I'll—never trouble you again—or anyone on earth. Be honest with me, for the love of God. I can't bear you to put out feelers like this, when you know me—when you know how I worship and adore you. When you know that I cannot contemplate existence if you throw me over. What is it? Are *you* wanting to 'back out'?"

Thoroughly alarmed, Marigold made amends, for Bobby had looked just like that the night before—the night before . . .

"Oh, Peter, darling! I wouldn't give you up for anyone in the world." Yet she cried that night while Min slept, soaking her pillow. Tears of self-pity. She had made a mistake, and it was going to be an irretrievable one presently. What was she to do? She couldn't risk another affair like Bobby's! But how could she face a life-long strain? Always acting—pretending to be something she was not, and never could be?

The odd part of it was that she loved Peter and was always sorry when she had wounded him or made him suffer. She was proud of his appearance, and happy when in his society. But to marry him was to make the mistake of her life.

Marigold stared into the darkness while sleep gradually overcame consciousness, weighing down her eyelids, and saw as with second-sight the inevitable end of marriage with Peter. She was bound to deceive him; he was bound to be disappointed in her, unless she was more clever than most. She would have to encourage lovers, if only as a reaction from the virtues of domesticity; and the thought of lovers, the excitement of intrigues, thrilled her pleasantly. The prospect of post-marital love-affairs could be viewed without compunction, as they were the only affairs in which married women could be expected to take any interest, if bound to good men whose exalted standards of life made the days dull and depressing. For Marigold could not imagine finding a husband anything but stale after the honeymoon; and if inclined to keep his wife on a pedestal, he would be a bore.

Yet she could not find it in her heart to pity Peter married to herself, and wish him a better fate, for he was a dear, lovable being; and once married to him, she would always have to protect him from the pain of disillusionment.

What cheats women were! Even her own mother had never let her husband know the half she did when he was out of the way. Marigold could not forget that she had seen a man, not her father, kissing her mother in the drawing-room. She had been given a beautiful doll's house to divert her mind and had had to promise to say nothing about it. It was so long ago that her mother had

probably no memory of the occasion, having had many admirers since, but there are some things a child stores in mind in all the years of life, and their influence on character are immeasurable.

Marigold fell asleep eventually, with only one regret, and that was Peter's lack of riches. Money provided many compensations, and perhaps made it easier to be good.

## CHAPTER XX

### A DAY OF SHOCKS

MARGOT made her way to the office on the morning of her mother's illness in ignorance of all that was taking place at the flat, her mind burdened with difficulties and problems of her own which she had not confided to anyone. It was not Margot's way to seek advice in matters personal to herself, for her practical common sense was more reliable than any help she could get from her family. Megan's sense of duty to her flesh and blood relations would bias advice, while Mrs. Cowen's illogical mind could contribute nothing to a solution of the pressing trouble.

For some time she had been aware that she was becoming an object of respectful interest to her employer, an elderly bachelor of considerable means, and though she had offered him no encouragement, she had no doubt whatever that she was fast approaching a crisis when a proposal of marriage would certainly be made. Most girls in her position would have been flattered, and even ready to seize the chance of leaping to prosperity even by marriage to a man no longer young, for Graham Vaughan was a personality, and highly respected by all. A little bald, a little stout, essentially a cultured gentleman and one to be trusted. He had built up his business from small beginnings till it was an established success with a rabbit-warren of offices engaged for the production of magazines known in all parts of the world.



Rumour said he was very wealthy, and that many women in society would be ready to become his wife if he spoke the word, yet Graham Vaughan was looking for one in his private secretary, whom he had scarcely known a year. There is no accounting for these things, unless it was that he had had unique opportunities for studying Margot's character, and had come to the conclusion that she was all he wanted in a wife. To be sure, she was very young and hardly likely to mate with one of his age. She would look to a contemporary—some gay young fellow who could partner her at dances and make life a romantic affair. Apparently, these thoughts had weighed on him and given him that light of deprecation in his eyes whenever he spoke to her on matters unconnected with her work.

Margot, being no fool, could sense the situation, and had therefore done her best to remain elusive and discouraging, though it was not in her to be anything but gentle and polite.

All the way in the Underground she was troubled with the feeling that she could not always remain aloof. Some little thing would bring about a declaration and she would have to give her answer in the negative, for under no circumstances could she marry where she did not love. Had she cared for Graham Vaughan, or felt that she could learn to care for him in time, she would have thought she was doing right to help her family to easier times. But it was nothing short of physical repulsion to think of a close relationship with any man who was not the man in the world for her—such as——

Margot would not let herself even pronounce Peter's name in this connection, as it seemed a dreadful thing to do when he loved Marigold and they were engaged. But, unquestionably, she would have died for Peter, if dying could have given him the wish of his heart—his ideal to wife.

Married to Graham Vaughan would mean that she could do more for her mother and Min than she was now doing. Her husband would never grudge her mother a generous allowance and Megan would be free to marry

Rolly, whom she loved devotedly and freely forgave, though she was too proud to admit it.

It preyed on Margot to think that she was acting selfishly in holding out against this temptation to better her dear ones. And yet she revolted against the greater humiliation of selling herself for money. For that was what it would amount to if she married this kindly, considerate elderly man.

Matters were complicated by her feeling that a refusal to marry him must result in her resigning her job; for how was it possible to continue beside him after she had refused the honour of becoming his wife? It would be an impossible situation. What, then, would happen?

Here was the problem. The pressing need to provide money to place Min out of harm's way for the present, and none available without great sacrifices for Megan and herself. If she gave up her excellent 'billet' it might be long before she found another again; and then it might not be so lucrative.

Margot also knew that she was getting very tired of routine work and the disheartening circumstances of her life. She was obsessed with a desire to travel, as in the days when her stepfather was alive. If only she could go away—far away from the family—Marigold in particular, and the sight of happiness she was throwing away by her blind selfishness and lack of appreciation! The greatest cross she was silently bearing was the contemplation of of this waste of Peter's love on an unworthy object. To stand by, looking on and unable to tell the truth lest she should be helping to break his loyal and faithful heart, was more than she could bear. Yet she was bearing it, and hoping and praying for a change in Marigold's nature that could be nothing short of a miracle. Yet miracles sometimes happened. If only she had it in her to love Peter more than herself!

Margot tried to think of herself as married to Graham Vaughan, from every conceivable angle, and knew that, whatever happened, she would make him an honest wife. If she wished it, she believed, he would take her abroad on a long holiday. Frequently, he had hinted of his own

need for a thorough change and the possibilities of touring round the world. To leave England and all responsibilities behind her, was temptation, indeed. Many women sold themselves respectably into marriage for the good of others. Not all for selfish reasons. If she married this good man it would not be for the satisfaction of flaunting riches, but to cut herself adrift from a life that was fast devouring her youth and spoiling her nature. She felt that it would not take long for her to become just as irritable and impatient as Megan, and just as intolerant of her stepsisters, who had no sense of their obligations, and very little heart.

She tried not to judge her mother, but unhappily felt too little respect for her character to sympathise with her weaknesses. If only she could provide for her mother and Min, she felt she would be free to cut adrift and lead her own life. But without money, nothing could be done, and the only hope of money was through marriage where it now portended.

She was at the door of the office before she realised that she still swung mentally like a pendulum with regard to how she should act when faced with the necessity to give a definite answer to the all-important question; and again postponed further analysis of her feelings to a later time. Her work claimed her on arrival. Mr. Vaughan followed shortly afterwards, earlier than usual, and the oak door closed on them both. He, at his desk, read his correspondence, she, at her typewriter, sped through the letters before her, a sense of anticipation strong in the atmosphere.

A little business discussion occupied them after an interval, and Margot said to herself that the hour had come. She could not mistake the undercurrent of excitement in his tones, the reason for his nervous twitchings and uncertain voice. Feelings of panic assailed her. If only something would happen to prevent him from speaking!

But everything was as usual, and they were not disturbed by interviews or calls on his attention. He was free to put suspense at an end, and left his seat to stand behind her as he watched her typing.

"You are remarkably quick," said he, for something to say that would pave the way for what was coming.

"Practice makes perfect," she replied.

"You are a very steady worker, Margot." As he rarely used her name, and had never called her anything but Miss Sheridan, she felt all hope vanish.

"Yes, sir. I like my work. I am glad you are satisfied."

"Please don't be formal with me, my dear. I am trying to break down the wall between us. You must have seen that I have been trying for quite a little while. I have wanted to be your friend, but you have always been so reserved—so aloof. I never knew anyone so hard to capture for an outing—lunch, dinner, a show. You haven't given me much chance, have you?" he laughed awkwardly, his hands on the back of her chair, his face out of sight, yet she knew he was breathing hurriedly and quivering perceptibly.

"You are very kind," was all she could find words to say.

"Not a bit of it. Not so kind as I want to be. I wonder—do stop writing and give me your attention," said he, persuasively. "Nothing is so important as what I want to say to you. It is what interferes with thought and keeps me in a state of anxiety night and day. Can't you guess what it is? Girls are not usually so difficult to impress. Margot"—bending down from the back and taking her hands in his as they fell into her lap, his face beside hers—"I want you to be my wife."

It was said, and Margot felt a booming in her ears. Ought she to give way—or not? No man could have paid her a higher compliment, and she was overcome with gratitude and appreciation, but his touch left her cold.

"Oh, please . . .!"

"Don't be in a hurry to answer me. I know it is absurdly sudden. There are other things," he went on, speaking rapidly, softly; "I am so much older than you—if that is a drawback. I was forty-eight not long ago, and you are only a girl! But I am still young—terribly young in myself—strong, too, Margot. As young as any fellow of twenty-five," he laughed again with embarrassment as the colour dyed his face. "I want to suggest a few things for your

consideration, my dear. Think them over before you give me your answer. Of course, it is sheer bribery, but I would do anything in the world to get you, Margot—you proud, sensitive little thing—so self-reliant, so good! Listen—first of all—I love you. I have loved you for months—I have wanted you from the first.

“Then—I want to settle a sum of money on you before we marry—a marriage-settlement which will make you independent for life. It will be all *your own*—shall I say how much? This is a true bill—fifty thousand pounds. It is yours—as soon as the formalities go through. It’s worth thinking over—but, for God’s sake, don’t turn me down. See, Margot, I’m not a boy, and this thing has hit me hard. There would be no rebound in my case if you refuse me. I’ll take it as the closed door to marriage. There’s not another girl in the world I shall ask to be my wife. Only you. Will you think it over?”

He was too modest to ask her to love him. Only to take him, and let him love her! Margot felt a lump in her throat and did not know how to tell him in the kindest way possible that it was not the slightest use asking her to think it over when she had already decided against him. She had known, definitely, that she could not marry him as he was leaning over her with her hands in his, her very soul shrinking from the intimacy. That was not how she wanted to feel towards the man who would be entitled to claim far greater intimacies under the law. Yet he was good and kind. He was sincere, and deserving of the best.

But, how different if he had been—someone else! Unless she could experience the divine ecstasy of reciprocal love, she had no use for a husband, not even to bolster up the fallen fortunes of her family. If she must sacrifice herself on the altar of family needs and exactions, she would do it, working her fingers to the bone. No one had any right to demand more of her.

But how to make him understand, while her heart overflowed with feelings of warmth and affection towards this dear man—this great man, who had so condescended to her?

Her eyes lifted to his—eyes that were easily her greatest

charm, the mirrors of her honest soul—told him the truth through blinding tears.

"I'm so sorry—I don't know how to thank you," she stumbled, trying to express her thoughts. "But—forgive me . . ."

"I can wait, if there is any chance for me."

"It wouldn't be fair . . ."

"I love you, Margot, and can wait—your time—any time—if . . ."

"It wouldn't be any use—I am so sorry . . ."

"Is there anyone else?"

She expected that, and answered honestly. "Yes. But no one I can marry—no one who—who is thinking of me. . . ."

"Then—I am not afraid, seeing it is you. I know my honour would be safe. I would try to make you forget—give you happiness—Margot! Give me a chance!"

It was at this point that the telephone bell rang persistently, and Margot was allowed to lift the receiver while Graham Vaughan stood impatiently by.

Marigold's voice spoke at the other end:

Such a time as they had had! She was 'phoning from town—a call-office, Peter waiting for her outside—just to say that Mummy had been taken suddenly bad—heart attack, and Peter had fetched the doctor. Margot was not to be anxious, as the worst was over and Mummy was to be allowed to sleep—no excitement—all immediate danger was past. Who was to dream she had 'heart'? She had been warned, but never took it seriously. Now she would have to, and cut out all engagements. With care, the doctor said she could live a long life—but she would have to be careful.

Trembling from head to foot, Margot explained what had happened.

"You want to go home—of course! I'll send you home in my car. Margot—I'm so distressed, if you are worried. I won't add to your troubles by bothering you to think over what I have said. I know you will. Keep me in mind, and let me know your decision."

Margot took both his hands in hers—in a frenzy of

gratitude and affection, she kissed them both as a child would have kissed a father's, and repeated her refusal to marry him. "Forgive me, dear Mr. Vaughan. I would not be so unjust to you! I must *love* my husband, and I don't love you enough to be your wife, though I am fond of you—very fond of you. I don't think I can come back after—after what has happened. I don't think you will want me back! So I—I had better say good-bye, now. Someone will take my place."

"Margot!" His eyes flashed indignantly. "You'll come *right back* just as soon as you feel you can carry on with your job. Do you think I want to sack my secretary?—the best I've ever had?"

"But——"

"No buts." He pressed a bell; Margot was helped into her coat and Mr. Vaughan telephoned to a garage close by for his car.

"How good you are to me!" said she, and hurried out, her mind chaotic. Poor little Mummy! She was such a futile little thing, yet the mother of them all, and must be cared for and protected. If only she could have said 'yes' to Mr. Graham Vaughan! How wonderful of him not to tell her to stay away for good! She all but wept.

Of course, it was impossible for her to work any more that day.

The limousine, driven by a liveried chauffeur, arrived at the steps of the office, and picking up Margot, was soon out of sight, while girl-typists, peeping, discussed her. "Her mother is dangerously ill!" "Old Vaughan has sent her home in his car." "He's rather keen, if you ask me." "Do you think he's serious?" "Shouldn't wonder. Margot's very attractive." And so forth, and so on.

In a block of traffic at the junction of Oxford Circus and Regent Street, another and more opulent foreign car drew alongside, chauffeur-driven, with two people in the back seat. One was an Indian in a rich turban, the other was Min, her profile turned to Margot as she conversed merrily with her companion.

In another moment the traffic was released, and the Italian car swept onward, leaving Margot petrified with

astonishment. What was Min doing in town escorted by the Indian, when her mother was ill in bed?

In perplexity and filled with indignation, Margot reached home, only to hear that Min had been out since early that morning without letting anyone know when to expect her back. Her defiance enraged Megan, whose need of help to look after her mother and run the house made her feel at the end of her tether.

"It is a pity she can't have a beating. It would do her good," she said. "Wait till she comes home, I'll talk to her as she has never yet been talked to in her life."

Margot feared that no amount of talking to was likely to have any effect if matters had gone too far. Min was a fool and would be sure to come to grief.

She peeped in on her mother, who was asleep, and listened to Megan's account of the seizure and the verdict of the doctor. It seemed that her debility and neurasthenia of the past had been the consequence of a weakened heart. She had been warned not to do too much and advised to take life easy, but ever since her visit to Essex, where the temptation to recapture her youth and enjoy herself as of old was irresistible, she had been over-taxing her heart till it was now definitely diseased.

"Poor darling!" said Margot. "And we were all so unsympathetic about her hypochondria and nervous depression! All the time she was really sick!"

"She never believed her heart was affected, and would not let the doctor speak of it. Her high colour generally made her think she was recovering, whereas it was blood-pressure. She'll never be able to go to bridge-parties again, poor dear, and I feel so sorry for her. How hard I was on her for losing money!" Margot had to hear the whole story and be consulted as to how the money was to be raised, for until it was paid the invalid would have no peace of mind.

"She ought to see a heart-specialist," said Margot.

"There isn't any need, for she is not in any danger unless she is made to exert herself beyond her strength, or gets excited. She can live to a good age with care."

"Then—we've just got to take great care of her."



"It was pathetic," said Megan, describing the shock Mrs. Cowen had suffered over the story of the pearl necklace. "She would ask questions when she came round, terrified that Peter would condemn Marigold as a common thief, and I had to calm her down by making light of it, saying that Marigold had only tried to sell what really belonged to her, so as to make a fortune for us all!"

"Not likely!"

"And that she had used imitations only as a temporary blind. Mummy is now quite satisfied that she would have been the gainer if the scoundrel Timpson had not embezzled the money. Marigold is rather a heroine in her eyes."

"Poor Mummy!"

"But how on earth are we to raise twenty pounds?"

"She will have to sell one of her rings. It can't be helped."

"She doesn't seem to have much left. She has been gambling, and Min has made her part with her jewels piece-meal, she says. But there is sure to be something. I'll do what I can. Presently there will be nothing more to sell, and then if anyone gets ill, God help us!"

The day dragged to a close and still Min was absent. Megan could scarcely conceal her anxiety. What was to be done?

"She'll turn up when it pleases her ladyship," said Margot. "I shouldn't worry."

When Marigold was brought home by Peter, the subject of Min's acquaintance with the Indian was discussed with him, and matters looked infinitely worse when he showed how little he trusted Indians who called themselves princes in England. It was common knowledge that they often passed themselves off as princes since it gave them a certain standing among English people who were far too credulous. The only thing to do was to 'run the fellow to earth', and prove who and what he was. He was probably wealthy, most of them were, but they were usually very ordinary people in their own country.

"If you like," said Peter, "I'll pick a quarrel with him and make him leave Min alone, or he'll have to submit to the biggest hiding he's had in his life."

But this was not allowed, as no one wanted the publicity of a charge for assault. Megan thought that the best thing would be to find out the truth concerning his right to call himself a prince, and if he had been deceiving Min, she herself would be the first to drop him. Here the matter rested, and Peter left at a late hour to call at Prince Oolookibeta's hotel for news since there was still no sign of Min.

By this time, Megan and Margot were thoroughly alarmed. Mrs. Cowen had asked for Min and been put off with excuses. Presently, she might demand to see the child, and what could they tell her?

"You will have to say she is spending the night out," said Marigold, "which will be the truth."

"How can you take this so flippantly?" from Margot. "If Min has done anything foolish it will be the death of Mummy."

"She knows how to look after herself, believe me," said Marigold, "and if she means to marry that man, she will do so, in spite of all you may say."

Marigold went to bed, but Megan and Margot waited for Peter's telephone call which came a little while later, and Megan went upstairs to answer it.

"Peter speaking. Is that Megan? It is to say that I have been to the man's hotel, but he has gone away for the week-end. Nobody could tell me where. It looks very like as if Min has gone with him. Rather a blow. I'm *very* sorry for you all."

"I suppose there is nothing to be done?"

"Nothing that I can suggest. If Margot saw them together, then it is very certain that they have gone away together."

Megan thanked him in a frightened voice, and hung up the receiver.

## CHAPTER XXI

## BREAKING THE NEWS

LIFE at the flat was completely disorganised for the next few days while the fate of Min remained obscure. Fears for her safety, suspense and anxiety, played their part while the sisters talked over possibilities with bated breath. But the truth was rigidly kept from their mother. Megan lied as she had never lied in her life to prevent her mother suspecting anything wrong. Stories were made up and told concerning the good time Min was having with the Legges while Peter searched London with detectives for a clue to her whereabouts.

"How wicked of her!" cried Marigold one evening, deprived of Peter's society and driven secretly to provide for her own entertainment. "She doesn't even know how ill Mummy's been. But what does she care? All she wants is money to spend, and a good time."

"I only hope she is safe," said Margot. "What if the man is a cheat, and sailing under false pretences?"

On this point, however, Marigold seemed to be able to reassure her sisters, for she had met the prince's friends, and they had all a great respect for him. He was someone of importance, without doubt, in his own country, and letters addressed to him had 'Prince', or 'Nawab' on them.

"The whole thing is," said Megan, "she's too selfish to think for a moment how anxious she is making us all. She doesn't know how ill Mummy has been, and will probably send a line when she is beginning to get bored."

"I only hope they are married," said Marigold, "for Min doesn't care two hoots one way or another, and would just as soon experiment with one man after another."

"Surely she has some moral sense," said Megan. "But

it is alarming to think that we haven't seen or heard of her for five days, and that anything might have happened, for all we know."

A piercing shriek drew all eyes to the doorway where Mrs. Cowen appeared in her dressing-gown, having stolen in, determined to get at the bottom of the whisperings and secretiveness she had sensed all around her. Feeling able to walk, she had put on her dressing-gown and made her way to the sitting-room, only to be arrested by words that told her too plainly that she was being deceived.

"My God! What are you saying? My child—Min!—where is she?"

Dumbfounded, an eloquent silence was the reply.

"Megan?—Margot?—*Where is Min?* You have all been lying to me. Where is she? Who has she gone away with? Oh, oh!"

"We are positive she's gone with the Indian, Mummy," said Marigold. "Peter is trying to find them."

"Gone with the Indian? Not married decently, and by the law?"

"We have no evidence that they are married—neither do we know that she is with him. We only believe so," said Megan. "But control yourself, Mummy. Don't give way. Think of yourself!" She sprang to support her mother. But she might have spoken to the wall. Mrs. Cowen was already beyond self-control, and was gasping and shrieking with hysteria and suffocation. Both her elder daughters carried her to a chair.

It all happened too suddenly for anyone present to realise that it was the end. Mrs. Cowen's head fell back, she ceased to breathe, and the silence of death was in the room. In consternation, the girls bent over her till it was beyond a doubt that all was over, when Marigold fled from the room in terror. She had never seen anyone die before, and the sight of that awful quiet, the glazing eyeballs, and complete relaxation, struck home to her with terrible significance. "She's dead! She's dead! Mummy's dead," was all she could say, repeating the words to herself meaninglessly, and biting her handkerchief to stop the hysterical shrieks that rose to her lips.

No one, however, had any time for her. Margot rushed to the floor above to telephone to the doctor. Megan placed her hand over the staring eyes to shut out the sightless look. Gently she pressed down the eyelids and held them so while heavy sobs rose chokingly to her throat.

"It's Min's doing. All Min's doing. She has killed you, poor, darling Mummy! Oh, forgive all the impatience and the harshness I have shown these months past! Oh, forgive me, forgive me!"

In the midst of it all came a telephone message from Peter which the girl Lucy brought down to Megan. It read :

*I am starting by car to Margate as I believe they are there. Give Marigold my love and say I'll try to be back by to-morrow night.*

When the doctor had been, the two girls carried the body to Mrs. Cowen's bedroom and placed it reverentially on the bed it had occupied in life, and very tenderly they performed the last offices. No word was spoken, but the tears fell freely. And when all was finished, Megan closed the bedroom door and followed Margot to the sitting-room where both gave way to weeping. Sometime later, Peter's message was remembered and Margot took it to Marigold, who had cried till the source of her tears was exhausted. She lay still, staring at the ceiling of her room, red-eyed and wretched, recalling with wild remorse all the indifference and neglect of which she had been guilty in the past, towards the gentle creature now gone from them for ever.

"I cannot bear it—I cannot bear it, or this house, or my life here, any longer! I must go away! I must get out of this," she cried resolutely, "or it will send me mad! Min has the best of it. She has not had to go through what I have gone through." She was thinking only of herself, and had no mind to consider the others, whose grief was as great as her own, and deeper, and took no notice of Peter's message.

It was useless for Margot to show sympathy, to remind her that Peter would soon return, and he would comfort her best of all. Her one thought was to run away from the awful thing that was in the house in her mother's place, striking terror to her soul.

Margot could do nothing with her and sat watching her as she sprang from her bed to pace the small space round and about her room, beside herself with stark fear. The horror of death—the inexorable end of all living creatures, was in possession of her, and she wanted to forget it. . . .

"You don't know. You can't understand how I feel about it. What is it that happens really? She was talking to us, and the next moment she was still—*so still*—and it was no longer Mummy! It was a mask—a mask! I will see it till I die, unless I can go right away and forget. I must get away Margot. I *must*!"

"Control yourself, Marigold," Margot said firmly, feeling that it was useless to argue with her in this unreasoning state. "Sit down and behave sanely. You know it's Death. Everyone *must* die, sometime. We have to face it."

"*Don't say it!*" Marigold cried sharply. "If we thought of things like *that* we couldn't carry on. We couldn't live! It is haunting—terrifying——"

"Not at all," said Margot, calmly. "It is something that you put in its proper perspective, and then it is not at all terrifying. There are some things far worse than death—dishonour, for instance."

"You and I can't see things the same. I am not like you. I envy you, for you are so level-headed and brave. I am a coward—no use pretending I'm not. See—I'm cold—*cold*—and shivering! I feel sick, and I know if I stay here I'll die like her, and it's horrible—horrible to be dead suddenly—no longer the same, but a mask and a body that cannot feel. The mind gone!—*where?*"

"It is one of the mysteries of life that only through death can we reach perfection," mused Margot.

"No one can be sure of that. Besides, I don't want to die and be perfect. I couldn't be if I tried, and I don't know enough about eternity to pin my faith to anything."

"You don't give yourself time to think of anything."

"I don't want to think of sad things, of gruesome things! I want to be happy always, and no one will let me!" she cried childishly.

"You have the chance of being gloriously happy, Marigold. What's the matter with you that you don't see it?"

"You don't understand me. You never did understand me. Peter doesn't, and there is no happiness for me unless I get away quickly and forget it all."

"Get into bed and sleep," said Margot, her patience giving way. "You will feel better to-morrow and be ashamed of your want of self-control."

When Margot had gone, Marigold started feverishly to pack. A suitcase was all she needed, and when the house was still and a distant clock chimed twelve, she crept out, carrying her suitcase in her hand, and hurried down the street to a cab-rank.

A fresh source of trouble awaited the sisters when it was discovered late the next morning that Marigold, like Min, had left the house, meaning not to return, for a hurried investigation of her room showed that she had taken all she needed in the present with her, including her valuables. But no message was left behind to relieve their anxiety or explain to Peter where she had gone, and why. She had spoken wildly in the night of going away, but Margot had not taken her seriously. Now there was no mistaking the indication that she did not mean to come back, and both Megan and Margot felt utterly helpless.

"She couldn't bear sleeping under this roof while Mummy's poor body lay in her room waiting burial." Thus Margot.

"Could she have gone to stay with some friend?"

"She could have left a line—or told us. We were awake half the night."

"Do you think she'll write? She certainly must, to Peter."

"She'll have to write and explain. It is early to draw conclusions."

So they refused to worry, since Marigold knew what

she was about, and also knew that Peter was coming back that evening.

Megan wrote all the letters that had to be written, to friends and distant relatives, and sat down to wait for the only man who could be of use in this crisis. He would be with them that evening, and probably had a letter from Marigold awaiting him at his flat explaining why she was behaving so unaccountably.

It was very far from their imagination that Marigold meant to do anything impulsive and cruel; but it appeared that it was exactly what she had done, as a letter by a messenger boy in the afternoon explained to Margot, and which came as a bolt from the blue, enclosing her engagement ring.

*My dear Margot,* wrote Marigold in a large scrawl without any date or address to show where she had written the letter,

*I've done a dreadful thing, I know—that is, from your point of view. But I am a coward, no question about it, and cannot face consequences. It's no good telling me of what I should have done to be honest and on the square, for I simply couldn't go to Peter and say to the poor darling that I had changed my mind. The very thought of the scene which would be bound to follow paralyses me. But it is true, all the same. I have changed my mind—and it has been coming on a long time—ever since I met Hamilton Hoffmann, the American you saw me with at the dance hall. He attracts me greatly, though I don't suppose he will, for long. That's the worst of me. But at least, he is very rich and my life with him in America will be after my own heart. I know I shall always have a soft corner for dear Peter. But that would not be enough for him when he is so intense and faithful. I fear I am not, so it won't matter in the case of Hamilton—who, by the way, fixed up the licence days ago, and whom I married to-day at a registry office. That's all there is to say. I feel too dreadful about poor dear Mummy to return to the house or to look at her now that she is so different and terrifying. I can't help how I'm made. Sickiness and death simply frighten me, so there is no use my coming round, especially*



*if there is any chance of my meeting dear old Peter, for whom I feel so sad. Tell him what I have done, and if he can ever forgive me, I shall be glad. In any case, we are not likely to meet again as we are leaving for Southampton now and crossing over to the States by the Berengaria, which leaves at dawn, and on which Hamilton has booked a state cabin. Try your best to reconcile Peter to what has happened, as it is for the best, since it would have been so much worse if I had done it after we were married.*

*By the time Peter arrives at the flat I shall be in Southampton, glad for once in my life to have been courageous enough to run away rather than commit the worst mistake of my life. I am not writing to him, as it isn't any use. Please do what you can to make him understand that I'd never be any good as a wife to a poor man.*

*Yours,  
Marigold.*

Margot handed the letter over to Megan in silence, and wept for Peter. This was going to break his heart, and she prayed that the tragedy of Bobby would not be repeated.

"So she's let him down!" said Megan. "I am not surprised. She deserves to be cursed, to suffer dire poverty, some day. Poor Peter! And after making him sell that rubber estate at a loss, and choose a flat—oh, it's unspeakable! I'm glad I haven't to break the news to him, and don't envy you your job!"

Margot had no liking for it either, and shivered at the thought of the poor fellow returning with a high heart to his beloved—the shameless jilt!—who had no feeling for anyone on earth but herself. How could she have done it? What a despicable nature to be so callous towards the suffering of others! Bobby, and now Peter!

"If he can only weather it," said she, "at least, he is saved from a very miserable marriage. She would have brought him down, down. And since he loves her so deeply, he would have ruined himself to gratify her every whim. One might almost say, thank God, for his escape!"

Her vehemence and fervour, her concern for Peter, were a revelation to Megan.

What a perverse world it was! If only it had been Peter and Margot, how much needless suffering would have been saved. But it was too late, just as it was too late in her own case, for she had sent Rolly away and now the very obstacles that had been so insurmountable, only the other day, were swept away—but too late! Rolly had left her, fully determined to marry for sordid reasons, if he could not for love, and it was impossible to her pride to call him back. It was a cruel thing for him to have said even if he had not meant it, and unpardonable.

Megan kept out of the way when she heard Peter's knock, and trembled for him in his great disillusionment.

Never had Margot faced so great an ordeal as that which was hers when Peter arrived, looking wonderfully happy and cheerful, with the news that he had seen Min and her Indian to whom she was married. They were spending their honeymoon at Margate, and the Indian had satisfied him that he was genuinely the son of a Maharajah. Apparently Min was perfectly content with her new life, for she had all that money could buy. She was very sorry to hear of her mother's illness, and expressed penitence. She would make a point, she said, to call and make amends, for now she could be of material use to her dear mother.

She had yet to hear of that dear mother's death, hastened by the news of her disappearance! However, Margot could not think of Min and her concerns with Peter's waiting to be dealt with.

Peter was about to ask for Marigold when he was struck by the look in Margot's expressive eyes. "What is it? Anything wrong?" he asked anxiously, his eyes straying to the door, for it was strange that Marigold had not as yet come to welcome him.

"Peter—Mummy died last night!" her voice choked. "It has been terrible for us. . . ."

"Oh, Margot!—I *am* grieved for you—and *Marigold*! She must be feeling it badly. Oh, poor girls. It must have been very sudden?"

Margot commanded her voice to tell him, her lips quivering pitifully—quivering more for his own coming revelation than for any personal grief.

Peter caught and held her hands sympathetically, then, as his patience could hold out no longer:

"Is Marigold in her room?" Once before he had gone to her in her room.

Margot shook her head. She could not look him in the face as she said, "Marigold—has—left us, Peter."

Even then he did not understand. She was in grief. She had gone to friends.

"Poor darling! Where is she?" He wanted to go at once to her.

"Oh, how can I tell you!" came in anguished tones, and her face told him to prepare for the worst.

But he could not say a word to hasten the confession, only his eyes pleaded with her to spare him.

Margot cut short suspense and told him all while he stood as if frozen, his face the colour of ashes.

"It is the worst thing that could have happened—even worse than death," said she, in broken tones. "I am ashamed. I feel for you, Peter—terribly! She wrote. Will you read her letter?"

Peter's hand took the letter mechanically, and Margot averted her eyes, for she could not bear to see the pain in his, the utter desolation. What had Marigold done to him? Oh, Peter, Peter!

She dropped into a chair and buried her face in her hands, waiting—waiting and wondering what she should say or do—what he would say or do. How to have the inspiration to comfort him.

"Margot . . ." How his hand shook as it returned the shallow, selfish letter that unconsciously bared the ugliness of Marigold's soul to his gaze. The man who loved her so truly was shown the despicable nature of his adored one. The idol he had worshipped was a thing of clay. "Margot . . ."

His lips refused to form the words he wished to say, and he fell on his knees beside her, burying his face in her lap. It was the boy in him that was looking for motherly

sympathy, tenderness, pity, for he was utterly lost and forsaken.

Margot's tears rained on his head, her fingers caressed his hair with unconscious loving touches. "Poor, poor Peter!" She could not speak for the constriction in her throat. She could have caught his quivering form within her yearning embrace, but checked the impulse, for he was not hers—she had no right to pour out her love so openly. She could only weep for him and say, "Poor Peter!"

How could she let him go home to his silent flat and all the memories that would beset him when he was alone? She was afraid. Some natures gave up so quickly when their ideals were shattered, their love flung back in their face. She thought again of Bobby, and vowed that she would not lose sight of Peter. She must watch over him. See him safely past this crisis at whatever cost to herself.

## CHAPTER XXII

### THE LIFE-BELT

WHEN Peter rose to his feet and reached for his hat, Margot clung to his hands. "Where are you going?"

"Home—I suppose—to my flat."

"What will you do there all alone, Peter? You can't be alone—you mustn't be alone, for everything is worse if you have no one to help."

"No one can help me."

"I know, I understand. But to be alone, without anyone even at hand to—to take care of you, Peter! You need someone to take care of you," she pleaded, and a ghost of a smile quivered on his lips.

"I don't think it matters, Margot. Nothing matters now."

How terrible it was to her to see the havoc on his face. Oh, what had Marigold done to him! He looked dazed, as if he had lost his bearings.

Again he tried to leave, and she held him back.

"Don't go, Peter. If you must, then I'm coming with you."

"What good can you do?"

"I can look after you as Kit would do if she were here."

"Why should you care? Marigold doesn't."

"But I *do*!" she returned brokenly. "My heart bleeds for you. Let me come, if only to sit in the flat and talk, if you want to talk. The silence and the loneliness will be dreadful." She feared that, left to himself, he would starve or do some desperate thing.

"Certainly come, Margot, but why put yourself out for me? I'll manage. Perhaps you think I'll be doing—something mad?"

The tears were raining down Margot's cheeks and the sight of them made Peter draw her to him and hold her as he would a loving sister. "You are very sweet to care what happens to me—very sweet."

"I couldn't bear it if anything—happened to you."

"I'm not a coward, Margot. I'll stand up to this—never fear. But it has taken all the life out of me. Don't worry. Megan needs you—you must stay with her." How pitifully he tried to control his lips.

"We—both need you, Peter. We are bereaved—Mummy lies dead in her room—we don't know how to set about things—never having had to, before."

It was sheer inspiration that had made her appeal to him for help when it was he who needed to be helped. To throw herself on his mercy, to give him something urgent to occupy him, to put some other idea into his mind to save it from feeding on its own desolation—was to tide him over the worst. Time would, in the end, restore his balance. At the moment she was concerned to keep him up.

"Of course"—looking bewildered. "Make use of me. I'll do anything you wish—will you tell Megan? Only ask her not to speak to me of—Marigold. She always despised Marigold, and I—I couldn't bear that—now."

"I don't think Marigold realises quite what she has.

done to you, Peter. It was not in her to realise big things, dear."

"You—are right. But—I idolised her, Margot! She was all the world to me. It's ghastly to know—that—all the time she never cared—enough."

"She couldn't, Peter. It is the way she was made. I am praying to God that you will, one day, be thankful she did this now, instead of later, when it would have been far worse for you."

A tremor seized him and he allowed her to guide him to a chair, where he sat still for some time shaking as with a palsy, his face buried in his arms.

Every emotion of grief, desolation, disillusionment and despair that swept him, found an echo in her breast; she loved him so, that it was all so easy to understand, and her very impotence to comfort him was an added sorrow. She could only place a sympathetic arm round his shoulders and weep with him. All that was motherly in her went out to the boy in him, and she thought of his weariness and fasting, his need for sustenance, and how to serve him best.

Paying a fleeting visit to the kitchen, she was glad to find Megan brewing coffee, and returned with a cup, which Peter obediently emptied. Her heart swelled with gratification when he showed reluctance to let her leave him even for a moment to put the cup away.

"Oh, Margot! You don't know what you are to me just now," hiding his wet eyes against her arm while she stood beside him. "If I am a weak fool, bear with me."

"We are all fools when we love unequally, Peter."

"She never loved me, Margot!"

"No. Not as I understand love—and you understand it, Peter."

"That marriage licence—he must have known—I see all now. A double game! God!—and I trusted her. I believed in her, and all the time . . ." He swallowed hard. Some things were impossible to say.

"It doesn't bear thinking of. But—Peter—you won't always feel like this about it. You will wake up out of

your bad dream and be glad that her failure to be honest does not prove that all women are dishonourable, for the world is still full of goodness and beautiful thoughts." Philosophy was hard to accept at a time like this.

"God bless you, Margot!" was all he could say. His brain told him that it was the truth, but there is no argument invented that will heal a desolated heart. Time alone serves to readjust the outlook, and point the moral.

Presently, Peter left her, and she had to let him go, for nothing could be done that night with regard to arrangements for the burial. Of his own accord he told her not to worry about him. She was to rest assured that he would be all right. He was no boy full of rash and ungoverned impulses. He had had a 'knock out', and would take the count. By and by—who could say?—things might be different. Only—no one must speak to him about—what had happened. He spoke jerkily and almost inarticulately.

"I have got to worry this out alone," said he, on the doorstep. "It's the only way—if you will tell Megan—and Kit—and that I wish no reference made to it. But," and he clung a moment to Margot's hands, "I shall never forget how you have helped me, Margot."

Life at the flat, while Mrs. Cowen's body awaited burial, was a severe test of character for Megan and Margot, for the strain to keep up a brave front and see Peter daily as he worked for them, doing all that usually falls to the lot of a brother and a son in like circumstances, brought endurance to breaking point. Megan was crushed with shame for Marigold's wantonness, Margot suffered intolerably with the ache to comfort him, yet neither dared to speak a word to him on the subject. He had no use for sympathy, and was better able to help others if allowed to maintain silence and an appearance of stoicism which he did not feel. It was easy to see that he was living in his thoughts, but how much they were helping him towards recovery, who could say? All Margot was thankful for was that he had kept his word to see them through their ordeal, and was alive and well though pitifully worn and haggard.

To return to work at her job was impossible under the circumstances, and leave was readily granted her till she should feel able to return to her duties.

In the meantime, Min arrived in response to a telegram to express her contrition and sorrow for her inconsiderate behaviour, and in describing her hopes and ambitions, she was a welcome diversion. As it was too late for criticism or censure, Megan held her peace and ceased to trouble herself with her little sister's fate. She had made her bed and must henceforth lie on it. If ever she were in trouble, she would have only herself to thank for it.

Min expressed no surprise when told of Marigold's abominable treatment of Peter, for she had seen it coming from the moment the American from California fell for her. But the sight of Peter's face as he stood between herself and Margot at the grave, brought home to her the full extent of the suffering Marigold had inflicted on him, and she was filled with pity and consternation.

Poor Peter!—and he had been so loyal and trusting.

"We must cure Peter of his infatuation," said she, speaking like a sophisticated woman of the world. "Once he is thoroughly disillusioned, he'll be glad he is quit of her. It isn't fair that he should secretly excuse all she has done because she is so pretty, and keep on hopelessly adoring her."

"He knows she has behaved rottenly," said Margot.

"That doesn't matter, he'll keep on hankering for her just the same for by now he believes she couldn't help not loving him best, and deceived him because, up to the last, she meant to be true. He's got to know that she has always been like this—with an eye to the main chance, and absolutely heartless."

"How is he to know it?"

"Leave that to me."

"You must not speak to Peter about Marigold. He expressly wishes to be let alone and not made to talk."

"I won't talk to him. I'll probably never see him again, as we sail almost at once for India. Some day you will hear how I managed to cure Peter. But how he'll loathe



us Cowens. How he'll want to forget the lot of us for ever! We aren't very distinguished for honour, for I used to lie like a fiend to Megan about how I spent my time. Lucy and I used to have great sport making friends with strange men, and getting taken to the Pictures where we enjoyed quite a sentimental interlude. Pretty dangerous when you come to think of it. But Providence looks after infants and fools."

Margot wondered she was not ashamed to speak of it, but Min seemed to take a pleasure in a form of frankness that was perhaps the redeeming point in her character.

"By the way, my husband's name is Byjnath, and he is weakness itself where I am concerned. You never knew anyone so completely under domination as he is since I became his lawful wife—mark the word, for Byjnath has never had more than one lawful wife, and she died last year. I'll therefore be a 'Maharanee', some day, which conveys nothing to the English mind. But I am called 'Princess' by everyone whom I condescend to receive, and shall be *Princess* wherever I live, which, by the way, will be temporarily in India, but permanently in Paris, where my husband is very much at home. Some day, you must come and visit me in Paris, and perhaps, Margot, I might be able to find you a husband."

"That's very generous of you," said Margot, unable to resist a smile.

"I have always liked you the best of my sisters," said Min, condescendingly, "and you may be sure that in my new position you will have many opportunities of meeting quite distinguished people—particularly on the continent, so there is no reason why you shouldn't marry well. It has always been a matter of surprise to me that you never seem to trouble much about men. I wonder why?"

"I can quite believe it is very hard for you to understand my psychology, so there is very little use in saying that I could not marry for any of the reasons that would content you and Marigold. Money is not my god, and very little of what is material satisfies me."

"I know. You are so odd. Megan too. Why she doesn't

have Rolly now that she hasn't Mummy or me to consider, I can't understand. He never really wanted to marry Marigold, and never proposed. She told me so. He was just fooling. Couldn't resist it, for you know she encouraged him only to show that she could take him away from Megan. He rather made game of her."

The matter of Megan's future was decided by Rolly himself after reading the announcement of Mrs. Cowen's death in the paper. He took Megan by surprise by dropping in a few days after the funeral and taking it for granted that all was as he wished between them.

He found her alone at home, for Margot had gone shopping at Westbourne Grove, and Min had returned to her husband.

"I've come," said he, "to arrange about the licence. When would you like to be married, old dear? I've seen the very flat for us."

Megan was prepared to pretend unwillingness till her pride was satisfied respecting a humiliating resolution he had expressed at their last meeting, but a look into his twinkling eyes made argument futile, and they spent the afternoon in happy communion as they planned their future together. Her only regret was the impossibility to provide for Margot, who would be homeless and, for the first time, alone.

Margot came home to hear the only piece of good news she had heard for many a day, and reassured them both concerning herself. She was not afraid of loneliness, and it had always been her ambition to live as a bachelor-girl. Already she had a scheme in view to take a flat with two other girls who worked at the office, and she had no need for commiseration. The sooner Rolly and Megan were married, the better for her.

Having expressed herself in all sincerity, Megan was made to hasten her preparations for her wedding, the flat at Kremlin Crescent was notified 'To let', and Margot had no longer any excuse for absenting herself from the office of Mr. Graham Vaughan.

A great many questions remained to torment her mind, for no one could answer them but Peter, and he had ceased

to call at the flat. Day after day, in dire suspense, she lived for the post; and when at home, jumped in response to the sound of the knocker. Still, Peter made no sign. She wondered what he was doing about his motor business, whether the lease for that expensive flat Marigold had chosen was signed and no chance of his backing out. She hoped that he had not had the time to make definite arrangements, for Min's disappearance had upset everybody and kept him busy till she was found on her honeymoon at Margate.

She wondered if he meant to continue in England or return to the East; if he was better able to bear his disappointment and disillusionment; when he would think of seeing her again, or if he felt, as Min suggested, only too anxious to drop the entire family and forget their existence. If so, she knew she would have to bear it with courage and resignation. She could sympathise with Peter's shrinking from seeing anyone who was closely related to Marigold, because of memories that must always be painful.

She had been at work for three months after Megan's marriage to Rolly Sherwell, the flat had been given up for lodgings near by, till such time as she could arrange to chum with special girl-friends, and she had abandoned all thought of seeing Peter again, when he appeared before her unexpectedly, one Sunday afternoon. There was a knock on her door, and when she opened it, she found Peter waiting for permission to enter.

The surprise robbed her of her usual self-possession and gave her a feeling of tremulous knees.

"Come in, Peter—how nice to see you again," she stammered, the colour leaving her face. It was wonderful to see him looking so much himself with the same kind look in his eyes—only a little thinner in the face and tired. She led the way to seats in a window where she had been mending much-mended stockings, and did her best to behave naturally while her heart beat like a sledgehammer in her breast. "Where have you been all this time?"

"Just working," he replied, on his side not blind to the

changes in her. "Why, Margot, you are a wraith!—what do you mean by getting so thin?" Taking her hand and enclosing her wrist between his finger and thumb. "You're fading away! Are you taking care of yourself, or cutting luncheons as of old and giving your money to beggars?"

"Not at all!" She laughed hysterically, it was so good to hear his solicitude. "Perhaps I've been pining—for a real holiday. It has been a long stretch, and London is warm. One gets fed-up doing the same thing year in and year out."

"You should do like me. I'm going for a tour somewhere—anywhere, just to reconstruct my ideas on life and things, and came to say good-bye."

"Where are you going, Peter?" she asked, her eyes widening with disappointment, for it was hard to find him just to lose him again.

"Oh, on the continent. Not Malaya, as I have no interest there now."

"How soon?"

"I am thinking of booking with Cook's to-morrow. What has stopped me, so far, is the thought of doing things alone. It isn't very exciting to moon along on one's own with no one to share experiences with. The fellows I know aren't able to leave their jobs."

"Oh, Peter!—you make me envious. I'd love to go!"

"Really?" His eyes lighted up with such genuine pleasure that Margot was emboldened to push the idea.

"It would put new life into me. How splendid! Let's go to Norway! I have never been. Have you?"

"No," said he. "What a brainy idea!"

"Or if you prefer it, we'll go to Switzerland and round to Rome."

"But are you sure you can do it? Don't raise false hopes and then dash them to the ground when you find that you can't leave your work, or that you're afraid of Mrs. Grundy!"

"We modern girls have plenty of liberty, Peter, and do pretty well as we like. Of course, I'll stand my own expenses—that's understood."

"I couldn't hear of it, and would love to——"

"I couldn't go unless I paid my way. You talked of pals long ago—said you thought I made an ideal pal——"

"I think so still, but let me stand the racket——"

"I'm not proposing to take a job as companion to Mr. Dunbar!" said she with a widening smile, while her heart continued to behave wildly. The bare thought of that companionship was thrilling. How wonderful it was to see him looking so much himself! How had the miracle been done? Which put her in mind of Min's assurance before she left for India, that she had the power to cure Peter permanently of his infatuation. Had she said anything to him?

"Do you know, Margot, I have only to see you to feel on the rising tide of optimism."

"That is why you have kept away from visiting me all this long time."

His face grew suddenly thoughtful and grave. "Don't blame me, old dear. I have been through deep waters—you know—and am only now coming through."

"I am glad, Peter. So glad. I have thought about you a great deal, and I have worried about you day and night, hoping that you were able to see things in the right way. . . ."

"I'll never forget how wonderful you were to me, Margot. I have been a bit of a fool, haven't I? But we won't refer to that." And as if a train of ideas had started out of the reference to his folly, he asked if she had heard lately from Min.

"Min rarely writes. Have you had any news?"

"Not news," he hesitated. "I had something from her last month—an old letter Marigold once wrote to her which she thought would be rather illuminating to me."

"And was it?" Margot held her breath. So that was what Min had meant when she said, "Leave it to me."

"I am only amazed at the disloyalty of her, a sister. Of course, I hardly needed any added proof of a fact I had already accepted. However, I won't discuss it, Margot, as there are some things that don't bear discussion. I suppose I shall some day tell you that 'every-

thing happens for the best'. Only it takes a bit of time to realise such philosophy."

"What about that flat? Did you sign the lease?" she asked with eager interest.

"No—I hadn't pledged myself, and was busy looking for Min soon afterwards, so that nothing was done. I got out of that."

"I am so glad!"

The conversation then returned to the matter of travel, and Margot enjoyed herself producing pamphlets of tours, and maps, hotel guides, and everything that could be of use to intending tourists.

"Unfortunately, I am a shocking linguist," said Peter, ruefully.

"Don't worry, I can make myself understood on the continent in more than one language. That was why I was loved at the office, when there were translations to do."

"Clever girl!" said he, smiling in the old way. "What an advantage! You don't know what a pleasure it is to think that you will be with me. I'm only just a little worried on your account," said he, honestly. The world was censorious, and he hated to think that people might be ungenerous in their criticisms of that projected tour together. Would it be fair to her?

Margot, however, would not consider the world, and Peter went home after a while, still concerned as to his duty in the matter. He was old-fashioned in his ideas, and exaggerated the effect on Margot's friends of the announcement that she had gone abroad with a young man, unchaperoned.

He was too fond of her to let her suffer in any way through his selfishness.

But to give up the idea of her companionship on that tour was folly. He knew of no one with whom he could be so much at home as Margot. She was one in a thousand.

Thinking of his hour with her in that little lodging, he was sorry for having neglected her so long. How pleased she had been to see him! He was surprised that he had ever thought Margot plain. He now thought she had a most lovable face with pleasing contours and wonderful

eyes. And though her voice was reminiscent of Marigold, how different were the two characters!

He had been through so much suffering on account of Marigold that he could never think of her without bitterness and a complete sense of disillusionment. And he welcomed the conviction that a time would come when the mention of her name would leave him cold.

Even now, it was strange how easily he was able to forget her in the contemplation of this foreign tour in company with Margot. And it came to him as an inspiration that he could settle the problem of the proprieties definitely by asking her to marry him. Why not?

Though he was not in love with her, he liked no girl so much, nor was so at ease with any as with Margot. She had been to him more than a friend at a crisis—the worst emotional storm he had known—and had stood by with sympathy and tactfulness for which he must forever be grateful. Her strength had been as a life-belt to a drowning man. She had saved his brain.

The idea of marrying Margot, if she consented, took root in his mind, and the more he thought about it, the more was he concerned to settle the matter without loss of time. If Margot would have him, he was sure he would arrive nearer to real happiness than he had ever thought could be possible again, and he would do his best to make her a good husband. Dear little Margot! Would she care to take the step?

Having made up his mind, he came back to Margot the next day and made his astounding proposal.

"Peter!" cried Margot, her heart standing still, then hammering against her ribs. "I don't believe you know what you are saying."

"I am quite sane, Margot dear, and mean every bit of it," his truthful eyes full of apology for appearing so soon to have forgotten the tragedy of Marigold's desertion. Did she think him shallow? "I have thought it out," he went on ingenuously, "and there is only one way in which we can travel together and be perfectly happy about it, and so—if you think you can put up with me . . ."

('Put up' with him!)

"Oh, Peter—you goose!" she laughed to cover her emotion. "I could always put up with you, you dear thing! But not as a husband. Shall I tell you why?"

Peter's eyes, wistfully deprecating, reminded her of a dog's.

"I was afraid you would think me presuming."

"Never! You couldn't be, if you tried. It is just because I know you do not love me." Her voice quivered and broke.

"I couldn't marry you, Peter, unless you loved me more than anyone in the world. More than you ever loved Marigold." She waited for her words to sink in, then smiled radiantly, taking his hand in both hers. "But, Peter dear, I am quite determined to travel with you and have the happiest time of my life!—if you want me."

"I do want you, Margot. I couldn't undertake that trip now, without you. It would fall so flat."

"Then it's settled. Don't worry any more about what the world will think. Go ahead, and make arrangements, and let me know when we are to start. I'll get leave from the office without any difficulty, having a kind 'friend in court'."

"Will you forgive me for suggesting—the other thing?"

The look of distress in his eyes made Margot take a sudden resolution.

"Peter—listen," said she, taking a breath like a swimmer about to dive. "This is not the time for any mistakes," and her eyes looked straight into his, big with courage. "I will confess that—I love you—*too much*. That's the trouble. Too much to be satisfied with the 'half-loaf'. See? Now, don't let us say another word about it. What I've said, stands. Please go now. To-morrow we'll fix up the details for the trip, and let me know what my share will come to. Try to cut down the cost, for I can't afford to be extravagant. Nor can you."

Her rapid transition to practical matters left Peter no chance to say what he thought or felt, and when he tried, not without emotion, he was not allowed to proceed, but sent away, as Margot declared she would have to get busy preparing for the holiday. As a matter of fact, she wanted



to be alone to cry with mingled joy and excitement at the amazing thing that had befallen her.

She and Peter to travel together alone!—perfect pals.

After all, he was nothing but a great boy, and Margot knew, as the sun shone, that it would not be long before he would come to her saying that he could not do without her. She almost heard him speak the words—"Let us marry, Margot, for I can truthfully say that I have never loved even Marigold as I love you; for, whereas I was mad, I am now sane, and know."

THE END

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